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BIGSCREEN BEAUTY
SIM2 Nero 4S projector
aims high with 4K HDR

BEST OF BRITISH

Q Acoustics' 3010i 5.1 pack is the budget system to beat

REVIEWS:

REL HT/1508
Predator subwoofer
Samsung 75in TV
Teufel soundbar
Pioneer 4K
Blu-ray player
Echo Input

**Super
sonics?**
All ears with
Sony's 360
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**OVER
THE MOON**
Does *First Man*
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Creed II
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■ BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

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→ MONITOR AUDIO GOLD → ROOM EQ → READER'S SYSTEM → COMPETITIONS

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03

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: March 21, 2019

Bring a cue to the cinema... p38



Welcome

The nuts and bolts of a home cinema are relatively simple. You need a room, a display, speakers, source and something to provide power and processing. Add a pile of movies and you're good to go. What next? Well, you could look at hardware upgrades to boost performance. Or you could begin thinking of some neat finishing touches.

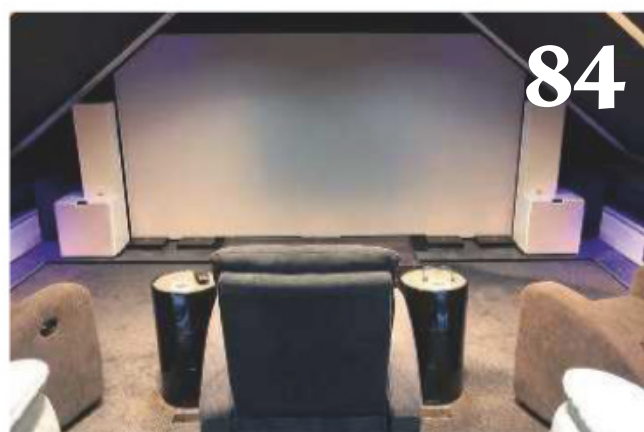


How about voice interaction? **A feature that five years ago would have still felt like science-fiction** is now delivered by Amazon's Echo Input (p61) for a mere £35. Maybe you'd like to fine-tune your system sound? Acoustic treatments will help, but you'll want to 'measure' your room first – see p30 for more. Or, for the ultimate finishing touch, check out one of our custom installs this month (p38), which adds a pool table to the AV setup, and goes the extra mile by integrating a bespoke LED/audio system to make potting balls a whole heap of fun. Okay, it's not 'home cinema', but I still want one...

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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John Archer:
The experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



Jon Thompson:
Film producer and post-production expert delves into Hollywood and AV



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HCC's former Ed. is one of the UK's most respected AV journo



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Former Editor of the UK CE trade journal ERT



Ed Selley:
Audiophile Ed mixes his home cinema passion with a love of vinyl



Steve Withers:
Movie fan, display calibrator and object-based audio obsessive

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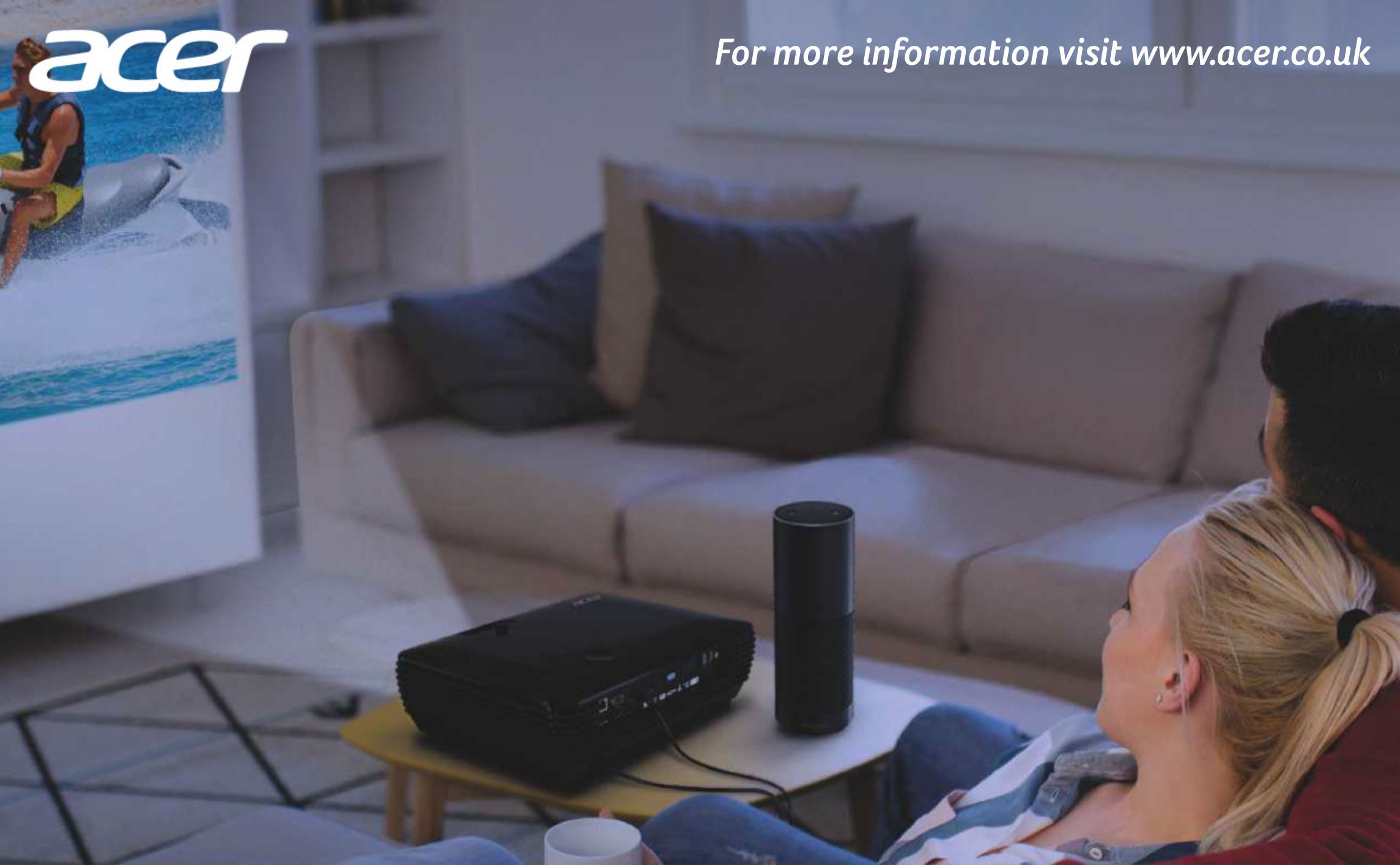


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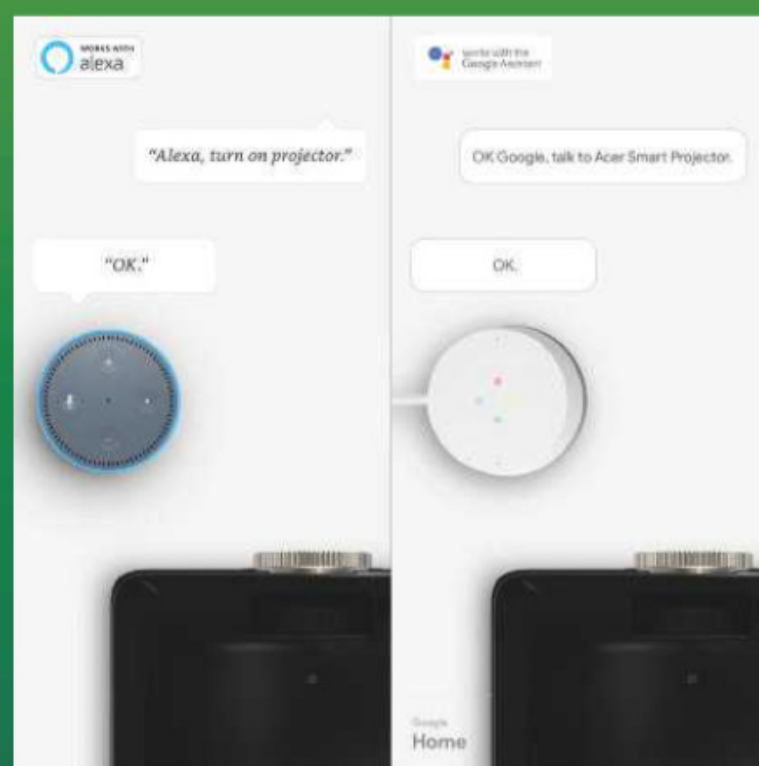


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BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** **MONITOR AUDIO** Speaker brand goes for Gold again
LG Teamup with Meridian Audio yields Dolby Atmos/DTS:X soundbar trio **TRINNOV** Pushing the high-end audio envelope **AT THE PLEX** This month's cinema releases **NEWS X10** The hottest news in bite-sized chunks **FANTASTIC BEASTS 2** Potter prequel set for 4K and 3D BD **& MORE!**



Pushing pixels

TCL X10 → www.tcl.eu/uk

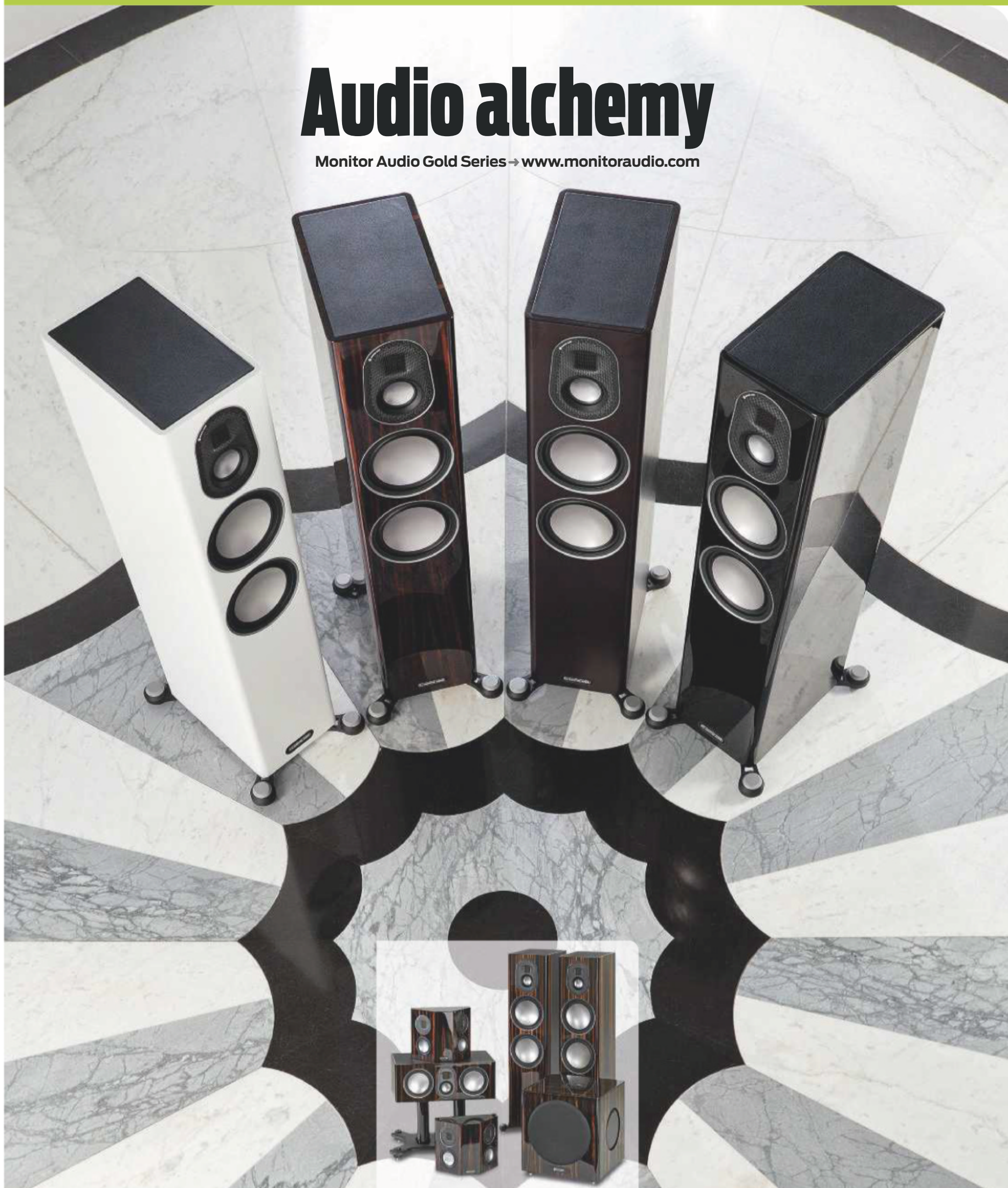
TCL's 75in X10 TV (pricing TBC) is the brand's debut 8K display, and incorporates Quantum Dot tech for wide colour delivery, Dolby Vision playback and multizone LED dimming. Atmos decoding is integrated, and the soundbar, designed in collaboration with Onkyo, also functions as a standalone speaker when the TV is switched off. TCL says this rich feature count ensures its flatscreen, due for release in the second half of 2019, is 'ahead of the curve...'

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facebook.com/homecinemachoice

Audio alchemy

Monitor Audio Gold Series → www.monitoraudio.com



Monitor Audio has revised its Gold Series loudspeakers for the first time since 2014, borrowing technology from its Platinum II range to deliver what it claims is a high-end sound that offers 'fulfilment for the senses' – and fulfilling home cinema duties in the

new lineup (alongside two floorstanders and one standmount) are the Gold FX dipole/bipole model, Gold C250 centre and Gold W12 subwoofer. Expect to pay up to £9,000 for a 5.1 array (pictured) with Gold 300 towers on front left/right duty...

Pana expands 4K BD lineup



New for 2019 are two 4K Blu-ray players from Panasonic that will slot in beneath its current DP-UB9000 flagship. Both the DP-UB159 and DP-UB450 offer HDR10+ compatibility (while the latter adds Dolby Vision HDR playback), plus twin HDMI outputs and hi-res music file support including 11.2MHz DSD. Pricing still hasn't been announced, but we expect the DP-UB159 (and single-HDMI UB154 variant) to be eminently affordable. www.panasonic.co.uk

Surround sound, slimmed



Pioneer is refreshing its slimline AV receiver stable with the VSX-534, a seven-channel model with Dolby Atmos and DTS:X (plus virtual options); MCACC auto-calibration; and a more compact chassis (said to be 12 per cent slimmer than the previous generation) designed to slip into media room/living room systems. 4K HDR passthrough over HDMI extends to HLG and Dolby Vision. The AVR is available from late February, with pricing expected to be around £400. www.pioneer-audiovisual.eu

Samsung cues 2019 QLED

AI-assisted 4K image improvements, plus 8K upgrades revealed

Given how good Samsung's 2018 Q9FN flagship is, any talk of an image uplift for its 2019 QLED models and ranges might seem quite a claim. But, having been invited for a sneaky peek at some of the new tech that will be used behind the glass, *HCC* can report Samsung does indeed appear to have squeezed more performance from its pixels.

4K TV buyers can look forward to three key improvements: new AI-based image processing; a dramatically better viewing angle; and improved black level performance.

The superior off-axis viewing ('Q Wide Angle with Light Control') has been achieved by reducing light leakage to an absolute minimum. Direct comparisons with last year's model show a distinct improvement.

Meanwhile, a new AI-based 4K image processing chip will be able to better upscale non-native UHD sources, and combat errant noise and artefacts.

Samsung's previous 4K TVs have used conventional image processing built around a preset rule-based decision-making process; next-gen AI chips will be able to learn and therefore constantly improve image handling. Intriguingly, the incoming sets will also offer AI-based audio processing. When engaged, the screen automatically analyses programme material, and adjust its preset accordingly.

Samsung says there will be no changes to the peak HDR brightness of this year's QLED models, but upgrades to its panel production process have helped reduce blooming around bright objects for a sharper, more contrasty picture. The new AI chip will also allow the panel to dynamically manage HDR tone mapping, and consequently better track maximum brightness and colour information.

Slim fast 8K TVs

For 8K, the company has developed a new display driver IC (DDIC), which it suggests will allow for a new generation of slim, bezel-less 8K TVs. This DDIC can be used on display sizes 65in and above.

The new DDIC (named S6CT93P) boasts twice the intra-panel data transfer speed of the driver used in its 2018 8K debutants. This boost enhances the efficiency of the display's system performance and reduces the need for additional components.

Because 8K screens have four times the pixels than a 4K model, a greater number of components are required to do the job. As this new 4Gbps interface is twice as fast, we're told, engineers can reduce component clutter, which in turn opens up opportunities when it comes to cosmetic design.

'To deliver true 8K, it is essential for today's DDICs to support a high-speed intra-panel interface,' explains Ben K. Hur, senior vice president of System LSI marketing at Samsung Electronics. 'Our DDIC will bring stunning 8K images... and take visual experiences on largescreen TVs to a new level.'

Playlist...

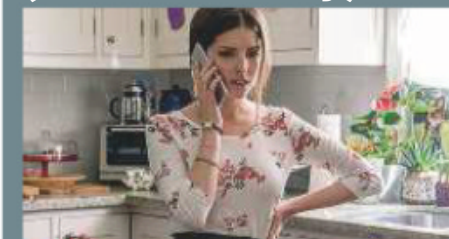
Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

The Predator (Ultra HD Blu-ray)

Big, dumb, but loads of fun, Shane Black's sci-fi-action sequel delivers as many laughs as it does explosions. It also looks and sounds superb on 4K Blu-ray.



A Simple Favour (Ultra HD Blu-ray)



This stylish black comedy is sharper than ever in Ultra HD guise, courtesy of Dolby Vision grading and a boost in fine detail.

Parents (Region B BD)



This smart horror-comedy about the darker side of 1950s suburbia makes its hi-def debut, loaded with bonus goodies.

Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion (Region B BD)



Newly restored 1970 thriller surfaces on Blu-ray with an array of excellent, insightful extras.

Elvira, Mistress of the Dark (Region B BD)



Fans of the iconic horror hostess had their prayers answered by this well-stacked release.

Samsung's 8K displays may say goodbye to bezels



At the 'plex...

Heading out to see a flick?
Catch these this month

Cold Pursuit



February 22: Liam Neeson stars in this blackly comic action thriller about a snowplow driver out for revenge on the drug cartel who murdered his son. It's directed by Hans Petter Moland, who also helmed the 2014 Norwegian film that *Cold Pursuit* is based on.

Ring

March 01: Ahead of its Blu-ray debut on March 18, Arrow's new 4K restoration of Hideo Nakata's 1998 'J-horror' masterpiece is hitting the road and will be playing selected cinemas across the UK.

Captain Marvel



March 08: Marvel dials back the clock to the mid-1990s for its first female-led superhero blockbuster. Brie Larson plays the titular US Air Force pilot-turned-extraterrestrial commando, while a digitally de-aged Samuel L. Jackson returns to the role of Nick Fury.

IMAX injects Venom

Sony previews IMAX Enhanced movie releases, and *HCC* was first in line

Sony Pictures has offered an early look at its first IMAX Enhanced 4K content. Lined up for release are IMAX Enhanced versions of *Venom*, *Alpha* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Clips from all three were demo'd at the recent CES tech expo.

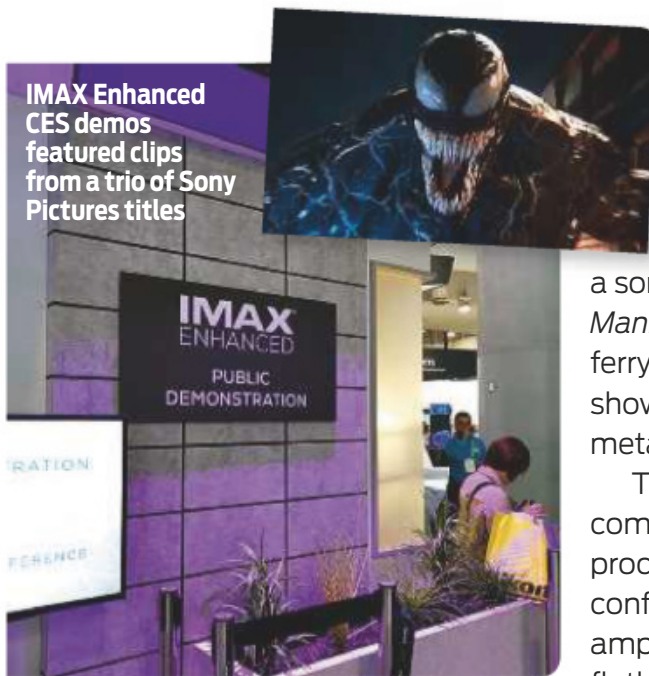
Until now, the only examples of IMAX Enhanced software have been BD releases of travel feature *Journey to the South Pacific* and science documentary *A Beautiful Planet*, neither of which are guaranteed to over-excite home theatre fans.

For those still getting up to speed, IMAX Enhanced is a licensing and certification program designed to cover AV receivers, display devices and surround sound processors. It's also a proprietary software encoding and mastering standard for UHD Blu-ray disc and streamed content. Software is mastered using a proprietary IMAX DMR post-production process, to minimise noise and digital artefacts. Films shot with IMAX cameras, and shown theatrically in a full IMAX aspect ratio, will also be released full frame on IMAX Enhanced discs.

Audio is delivered using a variant of the DTS:X platform, with the promise of full-range cinematic dynamics. Standard multichannel soundtracks, including Dolby Atmos, are typically mixed near-field, for listening on soundbars and small speaker systems. While an IMAX Enhanced disc may come with a choice of soundtracks, only the IMAX option is guaranteed to be wide-band. When content is played on compatible hardware, it triggers the appropriate bass management and associated output levels.

Sony's first clips demonstrated enormous promise. A dramatic action scene from the Tom

IMAX Enhanced CES demos featured clips from a trio of Sony Pictures titles



Hardy adventure offered seat-shaking bass slam and jarring transients, while the tribal hunt in *Alpha* enveloped with a sonic stampede. For *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, the ferry-splitting encounter showcased uncomfortable metallic wrenching.

The CES demo system comprised a Marantz AV8805 processor, in 13-channel configuration, coupled to two amplifiers – one running the flatbed speaker array, and the

second dedicated to six elevation speakers.

All the enclosures were from Definitive Technology. A quartet of BP9080x floorstanders were assigned front left, right, and rear surround duties, all with built-in upfiring modules; while a CS9060 covered the centre channel, and a pair of BP9060 models (with height drivers) managed side surround. Deep bass was delivered by two SuperCube 8000 subwoofers. Video came courtesy of a Sony VPL-VW885ES laser projector and Screen Innovations Slate screen.

For comparison, we viewed the same discs on a more 'affordable' home system built around a Sony OLED TV and Marantz/Definitive Technology sound system.

IMAX says it is currently working with studio and content partners to make available a 'steady stream' of IMAX Enhanced versions of blockbuster movies, both on Blu-ray and via digital streaming services (Rakuten TV has signed a deal for UK distribution).

The number of hardware partners supporting the technology continues to grow, with Lexicon, Audio Control and Trinnov (see p12) recent signees.

LG and Meridian raise the bar again

Atmos/DTS:X systems to arrive in 5.1.2, 4.1.2 and 3.1.2 flavours

The partnership between LG and Meridian Audio continues in 2019 with a new trio of Dolby Atmos-enabled soundbars.

The SL10YG, SL9YG and SL8YG all aim to deliver wraparound sonics via dual upfiring drivers in their soundbar chassis, and add DTS:X decoding to the feature set.

All ship with a wireless subwoofer and have 4K HDR passthrough over HDMI, integrated Google Assistant, and hi-res audio certification.

The key difference between the trio, beyond physical dimensions and



The SL9YG is designed for wall-mounting, and optimises its audio output accordingly

styling, is the driver implementation. The SL10YG is a 5.1.2 offering, while the SL9YG and SL8YG create 4.1.2 and 3.1.2 soundstages respectively.

The input of Meridian Audio, we're told, includes advanced DSP to expand image height and width. Says Meridian: 'The collaboration goes far beyond fine-tuning or adopting new feature sets, with both companies joining forces to engineer sound which delivers a truly unrivalled listening experience.'

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Press play

Discs spinning your way in the coming month...

February 25

Boar (DVD)
Class of 1999 (BD)
Doctor Who: The Collection – Season 18 (BD)
Halloween [2019] (DVD/BD/4K)
Hunter Killer (DVD/BD/4K)
Jarman: Volume Two (BD)
Maurice (BD/DVD)
Parents (BD)
Redcon-1 (BD/DVD)
Schindler's List (DVD/BD/4K)
The Unholy (BD)

March 4

Bohemian Rhapsody (DVD/BD/4K)
House of Cards: The Complete Final Season (DVD/BD)
Krypton: Season One (DVD)
Lost in London (DVD)
Phantom Lady (BD)
Possum (DVD/BD)
Sister Street Fighter Collection (BD)
The House That Jack Built (DVD/BD)

March 11

The Grinch (DVD/BD/3D/4K)
Next of Kin (BD)
Overlord (DVD/BD/4K)
Peterloo (DVD/BD)
Sink the Bismark! (BD)
The Nutcracker and the Four Realms (DVD/BD)
Submergence (DVD/BD)

March 18

Death in Venice (BD)
Doctor Who: The Macra Terror (DVD/BD)
Irma La Douce (BD)
Ring (DVD/BD)
The Ring Collection (BD)
The Virgin Soldiers (BD)
Wheels on Meals (BD)
Widows (DVD/BD)

Trinnov goes Pro with DTS

High-end audio corp to support 32-channel DTS:X on Altitude processor

Trinnov Audio has announced that it's become the first AV marque to license DTS:X Pro technology for domestic hardware, enabling its premium-grade Altitude32 surround sound processor to support up to 32 independently rendered DTS:X channels.

Currently, consumer AV processors limit DTS:X playback to 11.1-channel, usually a traditional 7.1 flatbed expanded via four ceiling-based height speakers. However, DTS:X in commercial cinemas is capable of 64-channel delineation; the new DTS:X Pro format bridges this gap to an extent.

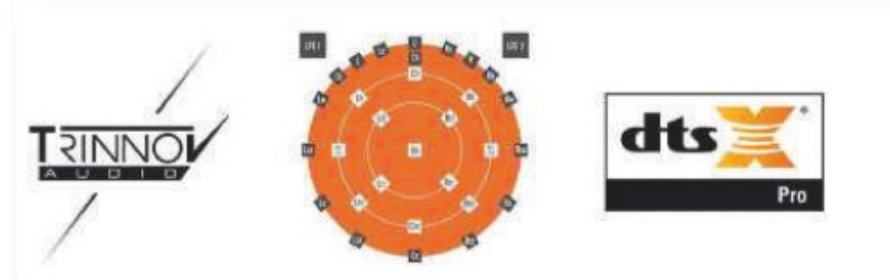
The functionality will be added to the Altitude32 (which also offers Dolby Atmos and Auro-3D support) via a free firmware update this year. The step-down Altitude16 is also getting the upgrade, albeit limiting DTS:X to its 16 independent channel rendering.

French-based outfit Trinnov says it has been collaborating with DTS on domestic delivery of its object-based audio platform since 2014, and delivered the first 'public demo' of a DTS:X 22.2 system at CES the following year.

The company also claims the architecture of its processor line, where a software-based approach is used rather than physical DSP silicon, gives it an advantage over premium competitors when it comes to developing format support.

Says Arnaud Laborie, Trinnov co-founder/CEO: 'Our software-based platform consistently enables us to release new formats before other high-end home cinema processors. In turn, our design allows us to offer the latest technologies to our customers at their earliest availability. This was the case with DTS:X... and we are now very satisfied to be able to introduce DTS:X Pro as their first licensee.'

Adds Joanna Skrdlant, DTS's GM of home audio and solutions licensing: 'The flexibility and power of Trinnov's platform, and its dedication to a premium home theatre experience... is why DTS partners with Trinnov for the DTS:X decoder technology portfolio.'

**DTS:X Pro is designed for true audio immersion**

Also on the way to Trinnov's Altitude32 and Altitude16 components is IMAX Enhanced compatibility, again through a free firmware update that's scheduled to arrive in the second half of the year.

Pushing the audio envelope

Trinnov's commitment to catering to multi-speaker setups was in evidence when – before *HCC* went to press – it announced it would demonstrate a 21.4.10 Dolby Atmos system at the ISE (Integrated Systems Europe) custom install show in Amsterdam in early February.

The room-filling array was scheduled to use speakers from Procella Audio and an Altitude32 in conjunction with Trinnov's new Altitude48 Ext add-on processor/DAC, which ups the possible channel count of the Altitude32 to 48 by using its analogue outputs and AES digital outputs simultaneously.

Of the system's 10 overhead models, three were to be assigned as 'height LCR', and another given a central 'Voice of God' position more traditionally found in Auro-3D installations.

The full system (powered by Trinnov's Amplitude8 amplifiers and Procella's DA range) was then planned to incorporate front wide channels, 16 surround speakers and five enclosures behind the projector screen – inner left and inner right added to the standard LCR. For bass mayhem, Trinnov had chosen Procella's 2 x 21in(!) V21 sub for main duties.



New firmware will add DTS:X Pro decoding to Trinnov's Altitude32 processor

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 SEED keeps on growing

Display manufacturer C SEED Entertainment Systems is continuing its quest to make the biggest TV money can buy. The C SEED Blade 283 boasts a 283in 'Super Cinemascope' 4K LED display with HDR playback and a peak brightness rating of 800 nits. It also carries six midrange drivers and six tweeters in its integrated soundbar, comes with its own media server, and promises a 160-degree viewing angle. Buy one for your luxury yacht.

2 Rising prices

Netflix has raised the prices of all three of its streaming packages in the US. Jumping from \$8 to \$9 for the Basic package, \$11 to \$13 for the HD Standard package, and \$14 to \$16 for its 4K Premium package, it is the biggest price hike since the service launched. There's no word yet on whether other territories will follow suit.

3 iPlayer makes a killing...

Hit dramas *Bodyguard* and *Killing Eve* were the big winners on the BBC iPlayer in 2018. As well as taking the two top spots in the platform's 10 most watched series last year, they also locked out the entirety of iPlayer's list of the 10 most requested episodes for the year.

4 UltraViolet to close

The DECE (Digital Entertainment Content Ecosystem) consortium has revealed the UltraViolet cloud movie locker will be shut down at the end of July. And while US-based UltraViolet users have been reassured they will still be able to access their films through linked digital services such as Vudu and Fandango, many of those options simply don't exist in the UK.

5 Record profits for LG

LG Electronics has announced a record-breaking full-year profit of KRW 2.70tn (around £1.84bn) for 2018, up 10 per cent on 2017. This includes the highest annual profit in LG's history for its Home Entertainment Company, despite a six per cent year-on-year drop in Q4 sales for the division.

6 Streaming Criterion

Described as 'a movie lover's dream', The Criterion Channel streaming platform launches in the US and Canada on April 8. Providing access to over 1,000 titles from the Criterion Collection, the new service should come as a relief to those film fans on the other side of the Atlantic who are still smarting from last year's demise of Filmstruck (which offered selected Criterion titles). Here's hoping that a UK version of the platform is also in the works.

7 Staying up to sit down

According to research conducted for Now TV, one in five Brits has stayed up 'all night' to binge-watch a TV show. *Game of Thrones*, meanwhile, was pegged as the series most surveyed would like to gorge on if they could find the time to digest its 67 (and counting) episodes.

8 Bad kitty!

Paramount is prepping a 4K release of the 1989 Stephen King adaptation *Pet Sematary* to cash-in on the cinema debut of the upcoming remake. The *Pet Sematary* Ultra HD Blu-ray will hit the UK on March 23 and promises new extras alongside legacy features.

9 Arrows shoots for the Moon

Arrow Video is bringing a new restoration of the 1986 sci-fi-action cult classic *Black Moon Rising* to Blu-ray on April 15. Extras include a commentary by film historian Lee Gambin, a look at John Carpenter's screenwriting career, and scenes from the alternate Hong Kong version.

10 Dawn... rises in 4K

Second Sight is gearing up to unleash restorations of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* and *Martin* on Blu-ray in the UK this Summer. The label has been given access to the original elements and new 4K scans are currently underway, with grading and restoration supervised by cinematographer Michael Gornick. Second Sight has also confirmed that *Dawn of the Dead* will be getting an Ultra HD Blu-ray release!



Join the rush to grab a copy of *Dawn of the Dead* on 4K Blu-ray this Summer

Premiere...

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Colourful Cage



Nic Cage is reteaming with the producers behind the psychedelic shocker *Mandy* (pictured) on an adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's short story *Color Out of Space*. Cage plays a man whose family are affected by a strange meteorite that lands on their farm. Cult filmmaker Richard 'Hardware' Stanley directs.

Like father, like son

Michael Gandolfini, son of the late actor James Gandolfini, has been signed to play a younger version of Tony Soprano (his father's most memorable role) in *The Many Saints of Newark*, New Line's upcoming movie prequel to *The Sopranos*.

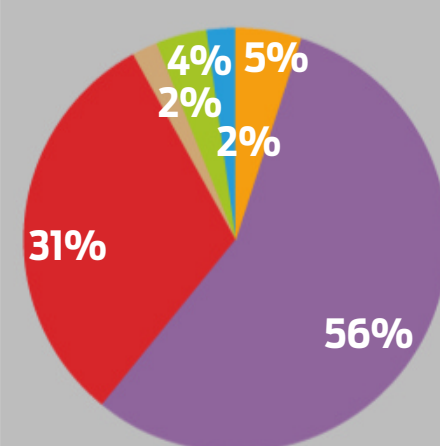
Lost and found

US TV network The CW has ordered a pilot for a smallscreen reimagining of the hit 1987 movie *The Lost Boys*. However, this isn't the previously announced take on the material by *Veronica Mars* creator Rob Thomas, but is instead based on a brand-new pitch from *Scandal* writer Heather Mitchell.

We asked...

How many subwoofers are in your home cinema system?

None One Two Three Four More than four!



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



A magical night in?

Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald → Warner Bros.
→ Digital Download/DVD/Blu-ray/3D Blu-ray/UHD Blu-ray

Warner Bros. is conjuring up a treat for fans of J.K. Rowling's 'Wizarding World' on March 18 when the *Fantastic Beasts...* sequel makes its UK disc debut. With the promise of Dolby Atmos audio on Blu-ray, plus Dolby Vision on 4K Ultra HD, ...*The Crimes of Grindelwald* aims to deliver a spellbinding home cinema experience. If that's not enough to tempt you, the BD, 3D and 4K releases also feature an Extended Cut of the film, reinstating seven minutes of deleted scenes, plus 'over an hour' of extras.





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Face to Face

Topics of discussion on the HCC Facebook page

'How many subwoofers do you have?'



Just one subwoofer at the moment. Upgraded to an SVS PC2000 and OMG what a difference that's made. Can only imagine what two would do!

Chris Bulman

One, but it keeps blowing a fuse every time I turn it on!

Kenneth Thomson

Still running my DefTech Powerfield 1500 and it's a beast. Flexes the doubleglazing...

Sebastian Fisher-Greene

What you're watching on your home cinema...



I've started rewatching *Game of Thrones* from the beginning, which is gonna take up most of my viewing for the next couple of months.

Gary Sharples

Mandy then possibly a *Jurassic Park*-a-thon.

Lee Bourne

A Star is Born for the second time as it's such a great movie.

Robert Lucas

First Man and *The Hate You Give* on 4K Blu-ray.

Mark Edwards

Still haven't watched *Blade Runner 2049* so that's being done tomorrow.

Ben Buckley



The Fifth Element and *12 Monkeys*. Having a Bruce blowout.

Ian Brown

As many movies as my eight-year-old daughter will allow me...

Gary Hurst



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Back of the 'net

Trailers, technology and more to check out on the web



Crossing the streams once more

A new *Ghostbusters* movie lands next Summer, giving Sony Pictures a chance to show off exactly how to do a teaser trailer – short and sweet, with a hint of the series' memorable score and a glimpse of the spook-catchers' Ecto-1 car. Jason Reitman (son of original director Ivan Reitman) writes and directs.

youtu.be/ulQmDFkGevo



Space invasion

The 19th edition of the Sci-Fi-London Film Festival makes its home at the Prince Charles Cinema and Stratford Picturehouse from May 15-22, promising a slate of premieres, documentaries, shorts, VR experiences, an all-night movie marathon and, erm, cosplay for dogs...

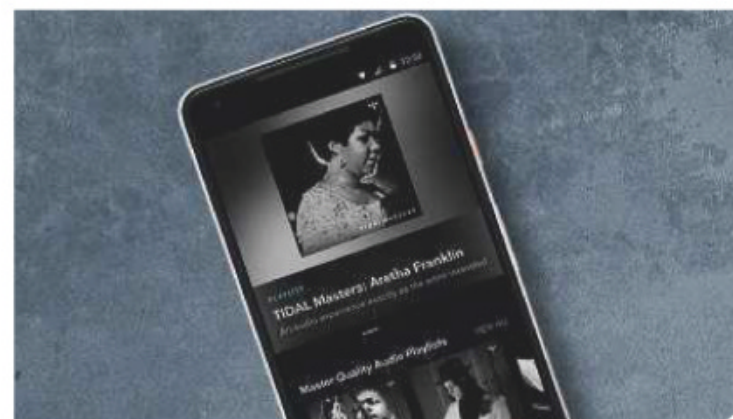
sci-fi-london.com



Busman's holiday

The Marvel juggernaut keeps on rolling this July in *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, which finds Peter Parker's European school trip interrupted by the pesky Elementals – cue various London landmarks going up in smoke. Line up a 3D screening to heighten the web-slinging fun.

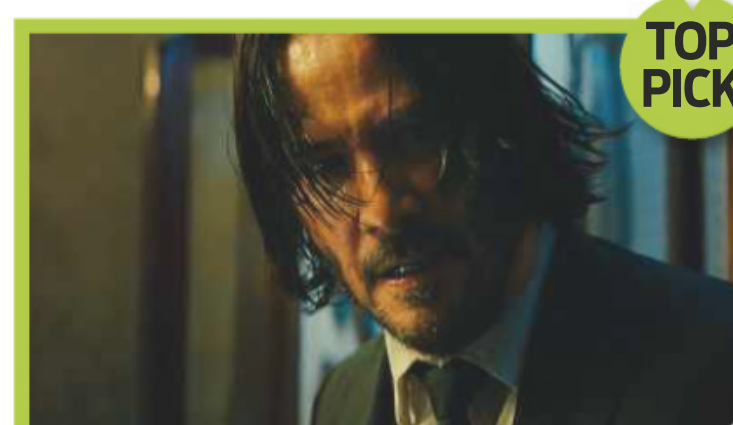
youtu.be/DYYtuKyMtY8



MQAndroid

Tidal's 'Masters' platform has been made available on Android smartphones through the Tidal app, bringing MQA streams (including The Eagles' *Hotel California*, natch) to those with a £20-per-month Tidal Hi-Fi subscription. Note that tracks are downsampled when output via Bluetooth.

tidal.com



TOP PICK

Looks wicked

Everyone's favourite hound-loving hitman is on the run with a \$14m bounty on his head in the third *John Wick* flick, hitting cinemas May 17. Regular cast members Keanu Reeves, Lawrence Fishburne and Ian McShane are joined this time around by Angelica Huston and Halle Berry.

youtu.be/M7XM597XO94



'Do I feel lucky?'

Over the course of 13 minutes, YouTube channel Burger Fiction collects what it describes as the '100 Greatest One-Liners – Before the Kill'. The result is a hypnotic montage of Arnie, Willis, Connery, Arnie (again), Eastwood and Arnie (again again) dispensing wisecracks and cinematic justice.

youtu.be/ro2x8gd2v-M



HDR for all

Philips OLED804/OLED854 → www.philips.co.uk

For its new OLED lineup, Philips has added Dolby Vision playback to the previous HDR10/HDR10+ roster, and boosted the power of its P5 processor to improve contrast handling, HDR performance and noise reduction – while Ambilight and Android smarts remain feature attractions. UK buyers will have a choice of models at both 55in and 65in (prices TBC), the difference being stand design, with the OLED804 (pictured above right) featuring slim feet rather than the OLED854's swivel stand.



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Sony has a new immersive audio format, but says it's not in competition with Dolby Atmos. **Steve May** reports on 2019's binaural recording revival



SONY GOES 360 WITH SOUND IN 2019



AUDIO IS ABOUT to get another upgrade. Sony is proposing a new format which would once again put multichannel music centre stage. The last two attempts, built upon Super Audio CD and DVD-A disc technology, failed to gain traction, but this time out Sony intends to combine object-based audio with psychoacoustics to reinvent the genre, ostensibly for streaming services and headphone users. The system is called 360 Reality Audio.

I've had an early demo, and was intrigued by the science and its execution. So is this really a new dawn for binaural sound?

Much like Dolby Atmos, this new 3D audio system offers an immersive listening experience. But unlike SACD or DVD-A, there's no requirement to invest in new hardware or buy specific discs. It sounds almost too good to be true.

The implementation at the moment is still embroiled in R&D, but what wrinkles remain are close to being ironed out. Workflow tools are already being used by recording studios. Research is being conducted in conjunction with German organization the Fraunhofer Society. Pop mega-star Pharrell Williams is a big fan. And it's not just new music which can be issued in the format. Studios can also remix legacy content, provided they have the original multitrack masters.

In a heartbeat I can think of dozens of classic albums I'd love to hear remixed.

With 360 Reality Audio, you'll be able to experience a holographic soundstage with (more or less) any stereo headphones. The delivery mechanism isn't disc, but a streaming service you might already subscribe to. Potential launch partners include Tidal, Deezer and Qobuz.

My demos, which took place at the recent Las Vegas CES, involved a direct comparison between a multichannel speaker array running the new encoded 3D mix, and then a pair of headphones with proprietary decoding of the same track.

A total of 13 physical speakers in a 360-degree dome configuration comprised the former. Even hardcore enthusiasts would find it a stretch to accommodate so many enclosures. But could a simple pair of headphones replicate the listening experience?

Made to measure

Prior to the session, I had to have my ears calibrated, using pop-in microphones. This Head-related Transfer Function (HRTF) measurement is key to the process. Every attendee at the same listening session therefore got a bespoke, decoded headphone experience.

It was worth the effort. The spherical soundfield generated within my headphones sounded nigh-on identical to the physical speaker arrangement. The effect was stunning.

Of course, in the real world it's unlikely a Sony engineer will be available to measure your lugholes. One solution, says Sony, is for users to calibrate their own headphones using the camera on their smartphones, which will take a picture of their ear shape. These measurements will then be stored as a user profile within a Sony app.

The tech brand envisages two levels of 3D audio experience. If you've had a precise HRTF measurement of your head shadow and inner ear, then the quality of 3D image placement should be high. The onus is then on the quality of the headphones themselves. Sony says it will self-certify its own models, signposting those best suited to the job.

But even without specific calibration, the listening experience should still be immersive.

Open standard

In development for the best part of seven years, 360 Reality Audio is an encode/decode process. It's clearly a rival to Dolby Atmos for Music, the big difference is that it's based on an open standard, specifically MPEG-H 3D.

Sony says it will share its technology with other brands in order to make 360 Reality Audio a universal standard, but denies it's embarking on a format war with rival object-based audio champion Dolby. 'We remain good friends and allies,' I was told. 'On our soundbars we support Dolby Atmos. But [for this] to appeal to the widest audience possible, we need an open standard.'

A launch date for 360 Reality Audio has yet to be mooted, although we believe Sony will introduce it this year. First there will be a service commitment from a streaming partner, which will then be followed by hardware and app announcements.

Sony Music is expected to offer the first songs, but industry heavyweight Warner Music Group is also preparing to join the party. 'To have a cohesive ecosystem, we need to work with the audio industry,' I was informed.

The idea isn't to recreate a live sound. The stated aim of 360 Reality Audio is to replicate with headphones what a music producer and artist can experience in a recording studio using multiple physical speakers. As Sony Music CEO Rob Stringer explains: 'We want to provide more creative options for artists.'

The commercial reasons to launch are compelling. The music industry needs another evolutionary step. Hi-res audio is widely available, and has found its audience. The potential for any future growth is probably limited.

More importantly, 3D audio could give fresh impetus to the premium headphone market,

Sony bills its tech as a 'new dimension for headphone sound'



Sony treated CES goers to a prototype all-in-one 360 Reality Audio system using multiple drivers

The initial aim is for the immersive audio technology to feature on music streaming services



which continues to be a product gold mine for audio manufacturers. For the CES demos I used a pair of Sony's £750 MDR-Z7M2s.

But 360 Reality Audio via headphones isn't the endgame. Sony is also exploring ways to free object-based music from cans to speaker systems. At CES, it offered an opportunity to listen to a prototype all-in-one music system, which used multiple drivers to create the illusion of surround sound. Quite apart from the unusual desktop design, this pre-production speaker sounded remarkably fine. Using Morgan Saint's atmospheric *Glass House* to prove its point, there was definitely a sense of spatial image placement where there were no physical speakers. As an everyday hi-fi it would be a wonderful proposition for the living room.

And it doesn't stop there. Sony executives also suggest that 360 Reality Audio compatibility could be built into an AV receiver, allowing a standard multichannel Dolby Atmos speaker configuration to deliver the same 360-degree sound.

Music, TV, games...

By building 360 Reality Audio atop the MPEG-H 3D standard, widespread industry adoption is potentially closer than you might think.

MPEG-H 3D has already been adopted into the DVB UHD TV spec, as part of the framework for UHD-1 Phase 2, where it's an option to customise the audio experience. It's also part of the North American ATSC 3.0 standard.

And another prospect for 360 Reality Audio beyond music is gaming. To date, Sony has resisted the temptation to add Dolby Atmos to PlayStation 4 games, yet there have been rumblings from developers that any future PS5 will usher in significant new audio technologies. Perhaps this is it, especially given that streaming is likely to be a key delivery mechanism for Sony's next games platform...

'360 Reality Audio is not just a technology innovation,' says Sony. 'It's not about Sony's ego. And it's not a fight against Dolby Atmos. We want to provide a richer listening experience.'

Sounds like a good idea.

Sony speaker is pure glass

Away from 360 Reality Audio, Sony isn't short of sonic newcomers this year, with one of the more unusual models being the portable LSPX-S2. The latest in a range of interiors-friendly Glass Sound speakers, this uses 'Vertical Drive' technology to vibrate its organic glass body, and disperse sound vertically in a 360-degree direction. It may look gimmicky, but as this glass tube has a wider surface than a conventional speaker, it creates a surprisingly wide and loud omnidirectional soundfield.

It also has an integrated LED lamp, hence Sony's suggestion that it's best positioned in the middle of a dining table. There's even a flickering 'Candle' mode for romantic nights in.

The LSPX-S2 supports Bluetooth with NFC, and can function as part of a wider multiroom home audio system over Wi-Fi. The only thing not particularly *bijou* about it is the price. You'll need £550 to bring one home.

Sony also has two new soundbars for 2019, the Dolby Atmos-enabled HT-X8500 (£350), and the £250 HT-S350.

Also compatible with DTS:X, the HT-X8500 doesn't come with a wireless subwoofer, instead using built-in dual bass drivers. These are joined by twin front-firing units. Sony's own Vertical Surround Engine handles Virtual Dolby Atmos, and the company suggests this 2.1 system delivers a soundstage comparable to a 7.1.2 Atmos array. The more conventional HT-S350 is a 2.1 package with separate subwoofer, employing S-Force PRO Front Surround technology.

Finally, Sony has a new universal 4K Blu-ray deck waiting in the wings. While we've yet to see the UBP-X800M2 in action, we're told it supports Dolby Vision, HLG and HDR10, and is compatible with hi-res audio formats, as well as SACD and DVD-A discs. App support covers 4K streaming from Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and YouTube. Expect it to land soon, priced around £350 ■



The HT-X8500 (left) uses in-built woofers rather than a separate sub, while Sony's LSPX-S2 (above) adds an LED lamp to its glass tube speaker

Will the successor to Sony's PS4 introduce 360 Reality Audio gaming?



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ECONDS OUT, ROUND TWO!

Creed II director **Steven Caple Jr** reveals to **Anton van Beek** why boxing is ripe for cinematic treatment, how he approached the series' iconic score with caution, and why Sly Stallone is like an 'old uncle'...

THE STORY OF Rocky Balboa – boxer, trainer, husband, father – has evolved over four decades. *Creed II*, landing on Blu-ray and 4K Blu-ray next month, finds the retired Southpaw slugger once again teaming up with protégé Apollo Creed (Michael B. Jordan), as he prepares for a heavyweight bout with the son of Rocky's former nemesis Ivan Drago (Dolph Lundgren). Calling the ringside shots on this hard-hitting sequel is director Steven Caple Jr...

The obvious place to start is with the franchise itself. Were you much of a fan before getting involved?

Yeah I was. I'm not sure too many people weren't fans of the franchise. But definitely – it was always around, growing up, after falling in love with it as a kid. And getting motivated as an athlete, I always applied the *Rocky* song to everything

I did, playing basketball, things like that. And then as I got older, I started to appreciate it as a filmmaker. Especially the first *Rocky*, which I believe is my favourite one...

Is it your favourite both as a fan and a filmmaker – or do you have a soft spot for one of the others purely as a fan?

It's the first for both, to be honest. Both for motivating me as a fan, and as a filmmaker it was rare to see a film where the hero wasn't perfect. He's a guy with a stutter, a guy who's messing up; so flawed, but so real.

I remember talking to Sly about it when I finally got to meet him in person, and he told me, 'People didn't want me to play the role,' because he wasn't the suave guy. They didn't understand that Rocky was going to be this bumpy character.



Steven Caple Jr (centre) putting Sylvester Stallone and Michael B. Jordan through their paces

Seven rounds of Rocky...

Watch these before *Creed II*

Rocky [1976]



Unfancied pugilist Rocky Balboa finds love, fame and a sense of purpose when facing off against heavyweight champion Apollo Creed – even though he doesn't win.

Rocky II [1979]

Rocky comes out of retirement and threatens his own health and marriage for a rematch with Apollo Creed. This time he wins!

Rocky III [1982]



Rocky loses his heavyweight crown to hungry challenger Clubber Lang – new friend Apollo Creed offers to train him for a rematch. He wins!

Rocky IV [1985]

Russian fighting machine Ivan Drago kills Creed in the ring, so Rocky signs up for a revenge bout in Moscow on Christmas Day. He wins – and ends the Cold War!

Rocky V [1990]

Rocky retires (again) and becomes trainer to boxing hopeful Tommy Gunn. Gunn then challenges him to a street fight. Rocky wins!

Rocky Balboa [2006]

Rocky comes out of retirement (again) to restore personal pride and fight young heavyweight champion Mason Dixon! He doesn't win.

Creed [2015]

Rocky trains Apollo Creed's son Adonis Creed for a bout with bad-boy fighter Ricky Conlan. Creed doesn't win.

How did you get involved with *Creed II*?

Sly was originally going to direct, and two things happened. One, he wanted to shoot *Rambo [5: Last Blood]*, which he's doing right now – he wanted to prep and do that. And two, he wrote the first draft and, to be totally honest, I guess he felt he needed a younger voice. I met with him first at the studio and he was very adamant about, 'Hey, I think I've got the structure cracked, but how do we really dig into the growth of Adonis and Bianca?'. He wanted to make sure that felt alive. And I helped him with developing the Dragos a lot.

When I got the call, it was one of those things where you're excited about the project because it's a great franchise, and at the same time you're scared, because it's a great franchise and you're in charge and responsible for doing the sequel.

You'd worked in the indie sphere before. What was it like moving to a major Hollywood franchise?

You know what? To be totally honest with you I don't think it was that different in the sense of, I guess, mentality. The workflow is different. You have a larger crew. You're trying to make sure you get your vision across to a bigger board, so to speak. Bigger department heads; more people. But going from a small budget film? I mean, my first film, *The Land*, it has a similar ensemble piece vibe. Everyone feels pretty grounded. Everyone has an arc. And those are things that I brought from that film to this one.

Whether you're doing a small project or a big one, you're really just focused on the fundamentals of filmmaking, which is storytelling. So I didn't get too caught up in the... it was a smaller project and here comes a big one. There are definitely times when I'm nervous on set, certainly in the first week, because there's things I haven't done before with visual effects. But I certainly had a great support system.

Presumably Stallone was part of that support system. Did he have much input into what was happening as you were shooting?

Yeah, he had a lot. As a writer we collaborated on a lot of things; different arcs. And as an actor, of course. But he only really chimed in when you wanted him to. He's a filmmaker, too, and I think people forget that. People forget that he's directed before. He's sat in that seat and so he understood my position, understood that the only way for this one to work – and he absolutely, passionately wanted this one to work on many levels, especially if it's his last one – he knew it would have to be me and my voice and my standpoint, so it can be fresh.

I felt like he's done that in the past. I felt like after *Rocky Balboa*, he'd reached the cap of how to tell his story. And now we're telling the Creed story and he wants to make sure it has a *Creed* stamp. But beyond that? He's extremely helpful with fight scenes, anything to do with choreography. And anything to do with Rocky, I would go to him. But, yeah, he's really like the old uncle on set. Sorry, I should just say uncle, I shouldn't say old...

Going into the film, were you aware it would be Stallone's swansong in the Rocky role?

I was not... But as we shot, I felt it in the air. He would say these small, subtle things, hinting that it was going to be his last one.

As we started writing this film... there's a moment where Rocky tells Adonis, 'It's your time now,' and that wasn't originally in the script. Sly just sort of went with it, you know. They touch gloves and they share eye contact and he's like, 'It's your time now,' and that was the second week of the shoot.

It was right there, at that moment, where I felt, 'Wow, this film is really a transition into more of Creed's world.' Sly was going to be taking a



Romanian boxer Florian Munteanu (centre, facing left) was cast as Creed's challenger Viktor Drago

backburner on this one. He's gonna be like, 'I'm that character, but this time I think I'm not coming back.'

All manner of sports have appeared on the bigscreen over the years, but boxing is one that filmmakers keep coming back to. What is it that makes boxing so well-suited to cinema?

Good question. I wanna say it's the fact that the sport itself translates very well and it's sort of a metaphor for life in many different ways. It's a sport which you're doing by yourself. You're not necessarily in the ring with five other people. It's not like soccer or football or basketball. It's all you. It's a mental game. Sometimes it can be a chess match.

There are so many moments within boxing, you know, from the training aspect to the actual fighting, that just register with life. So when you watch it, you can apply it to anything.

Arguably the best boxing movies are those that hit as hard outside of the ring emotionally as they do physically inside it. How did you go about balancing those two sides of the story in *Creed II*?

At first I didn't focus too much on the boxing, in all honesty. I wanted to see if I could make a full-on drama without any boxing. So when I got the script I was thinking, if there weren't any boxing matches how would I make the story still work? And that's when I came up with the idea of the hearing test, all these small problems... Sly needs to see his son, that wasn't in the original draft.

So I was approaching it that way. Then as we created it and went back to the fights it was like, 'Oh, there's ways to... he needs to climb back up out of the ashes, we can connect that to this storyline.' We were able to thread it together by treating it as drama beforehand.

When it came to staging the fights, did you have a clear idea of how you wanted them to look and feel? Did you take any inspiration from other boxing films?

I had no idea, it all happened so fast. I got the call right before Thanksgiving, and then I rewrote the script over three weeks, over Christmas break. On January 2nd I was ready to get my plane ticket to go out to Philly on January 6th. It was so fast that when we started shooting in March, I had basically two months to watch as much material and try to find a unique way to tell the fighting stories.

But I did as much as I could do in that prep window. And a lot of it just came from watching the classics: *Raging Bull*, the *Rocky* movies, *Cinderella Man*, Muhammad Ali documentaries. And then I started getting into karate flicks. Then just fighting films. Sports movies... Stuff like *Remember the Titans*, just to see where things worked.

And I went to real matches and I kind of found what I wanted. I thought, 'What kind of fight do I want to see at a real boxing match?'. I went to a few



Caple Jr watched boxing classics including *Raging Bull* in preparation for helming *Creed II*

fights and some of 'em were good, some of 'em were bad – and I started to pick which ones I liked, which moments in them were good, and tried to apply it to the screen. And then, just tell the story. The end approach was to be very aggressive, in people's faces with the boxing. I wanted people to be in *Creed*'s perspective a lot. I just wanted people to dodge and weave with him in the ring...

Absolutely. My head is still ringing from the blows landed when I saw the film. How important was sound design to bringing the audience into the fights?

Sound is crucial. If you've seen my first feature, *The Land*, you'll definitely see that carry over. It's a sports movie, too, sort of – it's got skateboarding at the heart of it. And sound totally told the story and helped the visuals a lot. And I think with this particular picture I knew that sound was going to be important. I knew that feeling the blows, feeling the wind of the blows – which is something I felt was missing from some of the boxing movies I'd seen, you don't necessarily hear the wind behind the punch – that just elevates... you see people trying to move because they know it's coming, coming with vicious intent.

I kind of tapped into that. And I played with colours for each fight. And mood. Whether or not we're doing handheld, Steadicam, how smooth we want it... things like that take a juxtaposition between each one and tell a different story.

Sticking with sound for a moment: the *Rocky* theme. This would be easy to fall back on too often, so how did you approach using it?

That one was a scary one, let me tell you. Once we realised that we were stepping into 'Creed world' – it's a *Creed* movie and we wanted to establish that – I was pulling a lot from the first film as far as music goes. So it was very tricky to find when would be the right place to use the *Rocky* theme. The two that I was juggling with – myself and the studio, because we were going back and forth trying to figure out which was the right spot – one was when *Creed* rises up from the ground in the training montage because it felt so epic, and the second is a knockout. And it made more sense, obviously, to go with the fight. But the Bill Conti theme is so iconic and every time people hear it, the raw instruments, they get excited. So we had to preview it a few times, adjusting it here and there. Sometimes it would be right on the punch, sometimes it would be right on the fall... We had to adjust it here and there by frames to find that sweet spot.

How did you find Florian Munteanu/Viktor Drago? He's a terrifying physical presence, but he also carries this soulful and pained look in his eyes at times, like a loyal but mistreated dog...

Yeah. He has a great look, man. Obviously he's very intimidating, but it was very crucial to me that he

Michael B. Jordan's other 2018 box office smash was *Black Panther*, where he played villain Erik Killmonger



could look like a sad puppy. Like he's been abused or abandoned. Sly put out this worldwide casting thing and we got calls and audition tapes from pro-wrestlers, UFC fighters, boxers... And when I came in he showed me these audition tapes. He said, 'I'll show you the tapes, I'll send them to you. But there's one particular guy...' – he'd already been working on the film, when he was going to direct – 'there's one particular guy who's really good. You should bring him in if you like him. See if he has the chops.'

I saw him in Sly's office. It was this crazy YouTube video of him just working out. He looked insanely beastly. He looked amazing, but I didn't know if he could bring what we wanted to the table.

Sly had a different approach. He was going to have this Drago character who was all fear... just yelling and screaming. And Florian definitely works for that. But when I pitched him my idea of telling the Drago side, even making them a little bit vulnerable, he wasn't sure if Florian could pull it off. So we had to bring him down to L.A. We sat him in a room with me and Michael B. Jordan. Then there was a day with me, him and Dolph Lundgren. You know, just trying to get a vibe for him. Meanwhile we're auditioning other people, pro-boxers. But he just connected with all of them, it was great chemistry.

When it comes to Dolph, how did he respond to the direction you wanted to take with the Dragos?

He loved it. He was afraid he was going to be the same cyborg-type robotic character from the first go-around. He was afraid that after being the villain for so many years it was going to be a set-back and really tie him to the politics of Russia. And he was relieved, from what he told me, that we didn't go in that direction at all.

We wanted to make him human, and he felt like this was a shot to play a dramatic role. He's always being cast as the Universal Soldier and this, that or the other when it comes to holding a gun and yelling. And being stoic with this deep accent. Now he had the opportunity to have layers and dimensions. And we worked hard at that. We had coaches on set. He was learning Russian. He really wanted, I guess, to use this as his opportunity.

Rocky IV was pretty over-the-top even for the 1980s. Was it difficult to get a handle on how to bring these characters back in a more grounded, believable manner?

Oh, completely. I wasn't sure if we ever did have a full handle on it. On set, when you're making the film, we were always checking to make sure we hadn't gone too over-the-top. Because it's easy to do with this kind of plot and these kinds of characters, and we wanted to make sure that the drama felt real.

So we would just check-in with each other. There were times when Dolph would come to me and ask, times when I would go to Dolph. We all had the same vision – but it's a tough one to balance, because you have to play it to some of the commercial aspects, there are expectations when you're bringing back iconic characters. But at



the same time, we're trying to figure out, 'What can we do to make sure it's real? What can we do to make sure it's authentic?'

Caple Jr. on Dolph Lundgren: 'He's always been cast as the Universal Soldier... holding a gun and yelling'

Is there anything you can tell us about what fans can look forward to from the Blu-ray release?

We're putting a few deleted things on there. Bianca's character had a lot more material that we ended up taking out of the film, not necessarily for time, but because it shifted the focus, so to speak. She had so much going on that we needed to narrow it down. She had a lot more – and I'm wondering if this thing goes on to a *Creed III* and *Creed IV*, maybe those are avenues to start digging into. There'll be some behind-the-scenes stuff about the fighting and you'll see the amount of work people put into the film.

And speaking for yourself, are you a fan of special features on discs?

I love them, man. I watch behind-the-scenes all the time. When I hired the films and went through the fight scenes with the cinematographer, we watched them all. The Muhammad Ali documentaries, the behind-the-scenes documentaries on that. The *Rocky* movies, when they used Steadicam. I just love watching special features. And director's commentaries, they're fun too.

Clearly you watch a lot of movies. Do you have a home cinema setup?

I don't. I need to get one. Sly has an amazing home theatre setup. I'd love to have one like his!

And to finish up, what's next for yourself?

I recently sold a project to Legendary [Films] called *ByAll* – and that was released, AKA leaked, I think, recently. So I'm working on that. And then I'm also working on this piece I've been writing about the first African-American NASCAR driver. But at the moment I've just been writing and reading anything that comes my way. Anything that I'm passionate about, I'm going to do. So I'm not going to run to the next Marvel film or *Creed III*. Just anything that speaks to me, to be honest – and that can be big or small ■

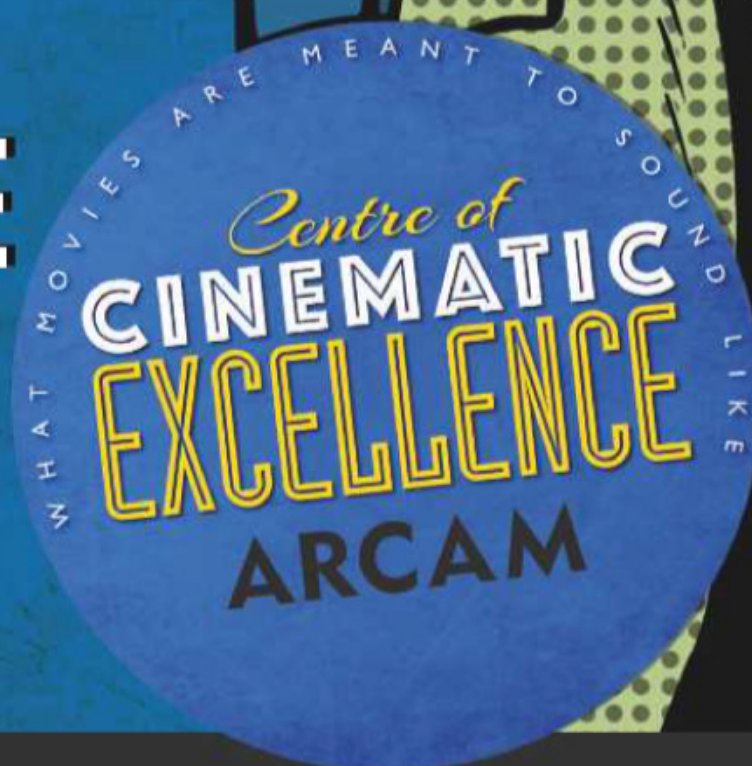
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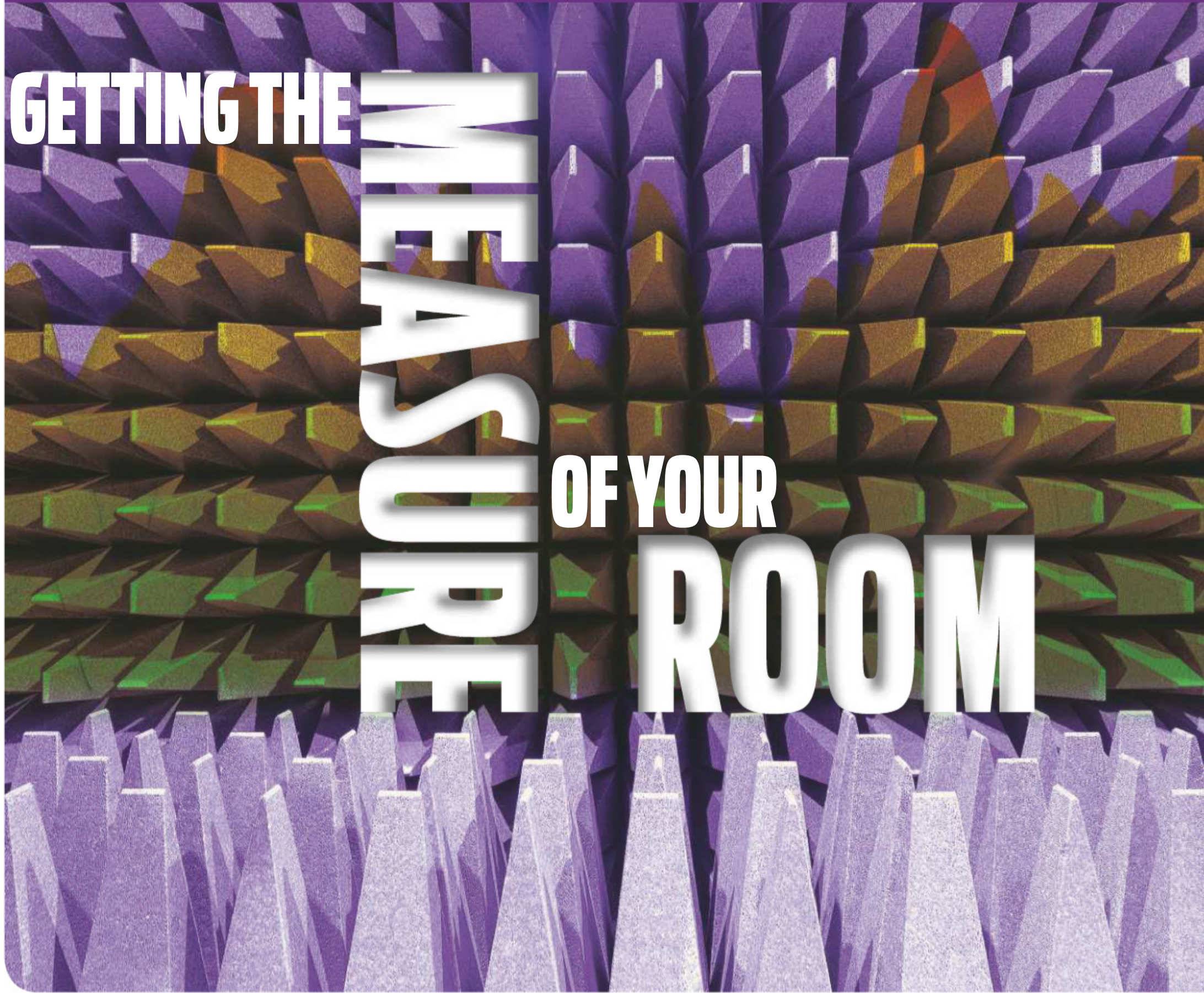
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GETTING THE MEASUREMENTS OF YOUR ROOM

Is your AVR's Room EQ leaving you all sucked out, muddled or booming with bass? Real Time Analysis software could help you see just what is going on. **Richard Stevenson** in 'on da mic'...

MUCH LIKE A celebratory spin of the beach landing scene from *Saving Private Ryan*, running the Room EQ system is an integral part of setting up a new AVR. The likes of Audyssey, Dirac or Pioneer's MCACC – to name but three – measure not only your speakers' distances from the listening position and relative volume, but also their frequency response from deep bass to high treble. Using various filtering methods, these systems aim to create a much flatter in-room response from your speakers by cutting sound peaks and boosting frequency troughs.

It works well, but it's not perfect. Lower-specification EQ systems are quite coarse in their measurement and filtering abilities, and rarely have the processing power to analyse sound in greater detail. Higher-grade systems with multi-point measurement, advanced frequency and impulse

response filtering, and serious mathematical processing, are much better. Yet even the best built-in systems are still no panacea for achieving a ruler-like frequency response in your room.

The reason is the sound you (and your EQ microphone) hear is not just coming from your speakers. Test tones bounce off walls, floor and ceiling and reverberate around the room until they decay down to nothing. Some reverb in the room can be useful in creating a lively sound with good spatial effects, but too much reflected audio sloshing around will muddy your soundstage.

It's a complex mix too. Different frequencies from any one speaker will have different reverb characteristics, depending on room layout, surfaces and furniture. One frequency might be louder or quieter, decay quickly or more slowly, diffuse

randomly or bounce straight back down the room than another. The latter might cause a room node where the sound from your speaker meets the reflected sound coming back the other way. If they happen to be perfectly in phase where they meet (a function of the wavelength and length of your room), they will double up the volume, creating a peak or boom. The opposite is true if they are out of phase, creating a suck out.

Both scenarios are termed room nodes and no amount of basic EQ filtering will solve the problem entirely. If you put more energy into a suck out frequency, the reflected sound will also be louder and continue to cancel out the sound at the node. A peak is marginally easier to deal with in EQ, but many EQ filters use a wide Q-factor, essentially the range of frequencies addressed. In reducing the boom frequency they will likely cut adjacent non-nodal frequencies and make them far too quiet.

The obvious way to smooth out some of these compounding problems is by changing your room. As that is rarely practical, however, the next best bet is changing the position of your speakers or furniture and/or applying room treatment, even if that is as simple as adding some more cushions and rugs. To do that effectively you will need a good visual representation of how these frequencies are behaving at the listening position, and that is where Real Time Analyser (RTA) software comes in. RTA will show you not only the relative in-room level of each frequency from 20Hz to 20kHz, but also show reverb and decay time of each on a 'waterfall' graph.

There are lots of RTA software packages around from shareware to very expensive analysers. For most home cinema measurement, free or low-cost options like REW or TrueRTA Level 1 will do just fine. You will need a laptop/PC to run the software, a good sound card or external microphone interface device, a measurement microphone, and some patience. If you want a quick RTA fix, there are RTA phone apps, but don't expect the accuracy or granularity of proper software and a dedicated mic.

A good basic setup would be REW software (free), a Behringer ECM800 mic (£30) and Behringer UMC22 USB audio interface (£40). For this feature I used both TrueRTA Level 4 (£99) and REW, a DBX RTA-M mic (around £100) and a Roland QuadCapture 24/192 USB interface (around £200). You will also need a mic stand/cable, USB cable and a cable to run from the soundcard to your AVR. If you are going to be testing for a while, some ear plugs or ear defenders will save you going mad too.

Ready, set, measure

With the mic set at your prime listening position, the RTA software outputs various sweeps/test tones to your AVR. If you have a stereo soundcard you can send the tones to two speakers at the same time, such as front main left/right. Using AVR modes like 'all channels stereo' will deploy all your speakers but will compound the complexity of the resulting graphs. You're best measuring one or two speakers at a time. The test tone sounds are captured by the mic, translated to a digital signal by the interface and displayed as a graph/plot on the RTA software.

Most RTA programs will start with pink noise (all octaves at the same power) or repeat a full-spectrum sweep that sounds like a 1960s' BBC Radio sound effect. Either way, for our purposes, both deliver an analogue signal to the AVR that should produce a ruler-flat frequency response in the room if all is well. That never happens.

Even in an anechoic chamber (pictured left) with no reflections, the vagaries of amplifiers and speaker design mean the graph will be bumpy or down right spiky. Add in those room reflections and the graph could well look like a cross section of the Himalayas. These lumps and bumps are what an AVR's built-in EQ system is trying to smooth out.

Just by moving the microphone half a metre left, right, back or forth you will notice a change in the shape of the graph, sometimes significantly so. If it looks smoother in any one of those positions, simply shifting your sofa in that direction should make a decent improvement in sound quality.

Almost certainly the peskiest frequencies will be low down in the frequency range. Higher frequencies are a little more predictable as they are more easily absorbed and diffused by room furniture. Bass will show no respect for your sofa, windows or walls and a lot of energy will pass straight through, probably for the neighbours to enjoy. The bass energy that doesn't escape tends to get reflected from hard surfaces, like a parallel back wall, and create nodes in the room. Don't be surprised if the biggest, ugliest nodes – the big valleys and mountains on a frequency response graph – are centred on the main listening position.

A lot of built-in room EQ systems won't even try to address bass frequencies and, if they do, filtering out the effects of a room node is near impossible. But as they can be a function of the distance your speaker is from the rear wall, simply moving your main speakers a little might may disrupt the standing wave effects or at least shift the node away from your key seating position.

For instance, a 60Hz note has a wavelength of about 5.7m, while 80Hz is 4.3m. That range is fairly typical of UK room dimensions, so if you have your

Treat yourself...

Try these in your room



Bass traps

Designed to reduce low-frequency room nodes by capturing bass energy before it can reflect and cause trouble, these can be relatively basic heavyweight absorption panels, or more advanced resonating traps tuned to tackle specific frequencies. Often deployed in room corners to limit boundary gain.

Absorbers

Although similar in principle to bass traps, the material construction of absorption panels means they are used to reduce reflections of higher-frequency sounds (around 350Hz and above, typically with most impact in the 1,000Hz-2,000Hz range).

Diffusers

Too much absorption can 'dead' the sound, which is where diffusers come in. These panels scatter higher-frequency energy, reducing reflection-caused nodes but retaining a little reverb to keep things lively.



HCC reader Stefan [see HCC #295] has treated his room's side-walls for a tighter sound

speakers up one end, expect some nodal chaos around those frequencies as low-frequency energy bounces back. Moving the speakers out from the wall or toeing them may well help... assuming you haven't got fixed in-wall speakers, of course.

Taking the analysis a step further, most good RTA software will also show a waterfall spectrum. This extends the concept of the frequency response into a 3D graph with time on the third axis to show how each frequency decays over time. You will find some frequencies are absorbed or diffused into your room fairly quickly, while other frequencies will bounce about and hang around. And even if this decay is measure in milliseconds, it's still perceivable.

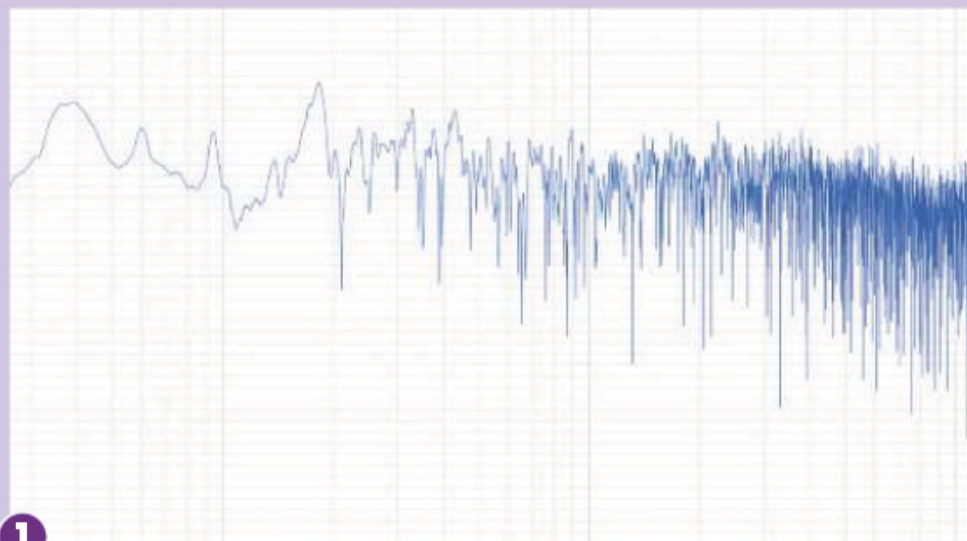
Treating these issues requires a bit more room damping to absorb troublesome reverberations or bringing in items that will diffuse them. Again, that might be as simple as putting down some heavy rugs to soften the sound bouncing off hard floors or installing book-shelves on large, plain walls to scatter reflections.

Don't want your home cinema looking like a mock living room in an IKEA store? This is where room treatment products such as bass traps, diffusers and absorption panels come in. These will be a costlier option, but relative to the price of your system hardware (and the money you may have spent on a dedicated cinema) can be a sound investment. Some room treatments offer precise frequency attenuation information, in the form of coefficient of absorption data, allowing you to target your room's biggest issues. For instance, if you've discovered a room node around the 500Hz range, then look for an absorber specified to work best in that region. Specialists like Artnovion present the coefficient of absorption data on their product's specification sheet.

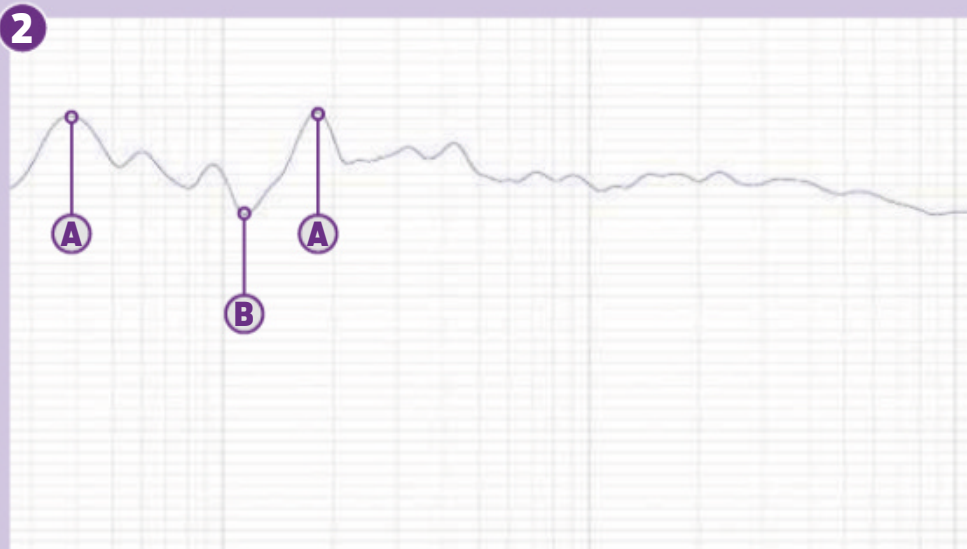
This may all sound like a step too far. If that's the case, note that experimenting with extra furniture and cushions, rugs, bookshelves and even bringing in some pot plants will all have an effect – and you can measure and compare it with the original graphs in your RTA software. Happy listening ■

1. The raw frequency response of my room/floorstanding loudspeaker, measured via REW software using a single 20Hz-20kHz sweep

2. The same plot with 1/6th octave smoothing applied to make a more readable response graph – it's now easy to see a couple of nodes that boost bass at around 40Hz and again at 180Hz (A). There's also a suck-out node around 120Hz (B)

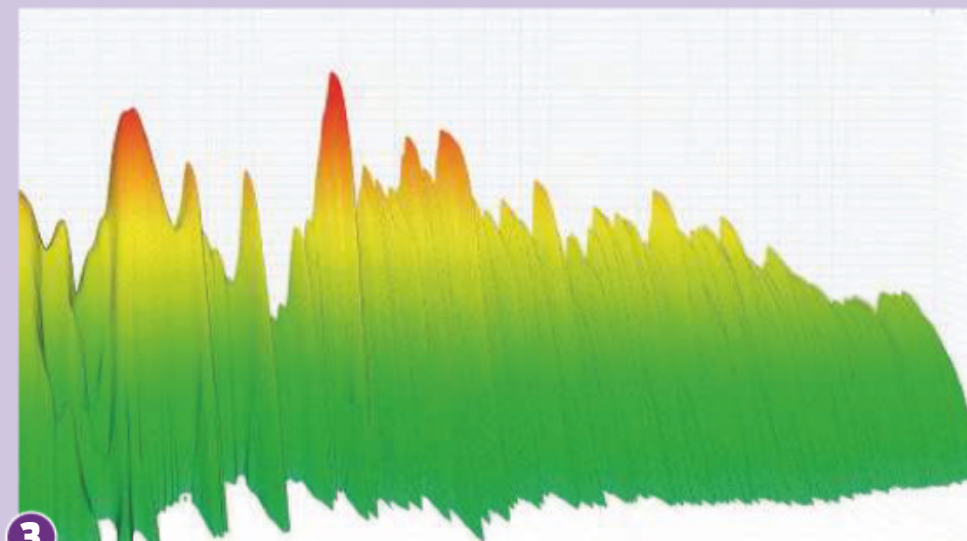


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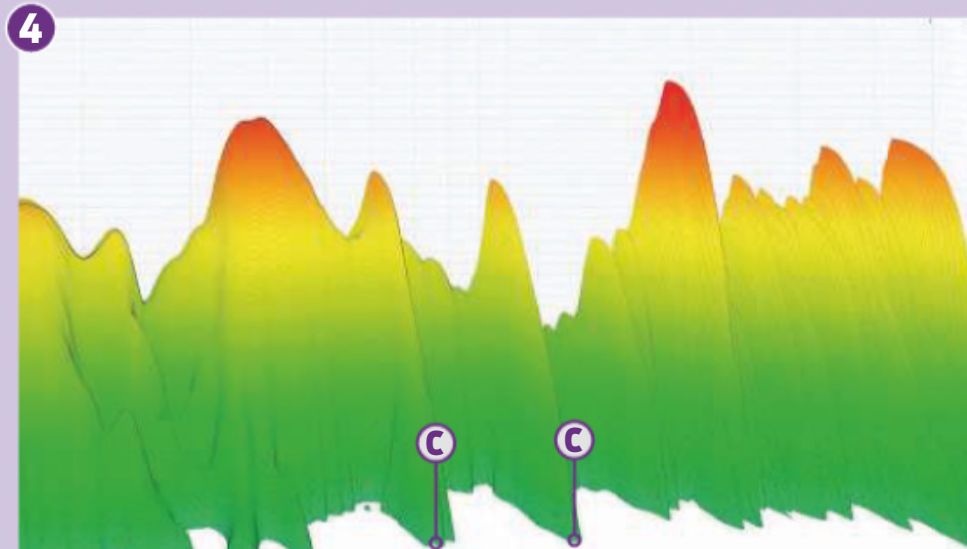


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3. The same measurement with a waterfall plot – decay after the sweep (0-300ms) is shown on the 3D axis. A full-bandwidth measurement makes the graph very busy, and doesn't show much of use that the raw plot didn't tell us



3

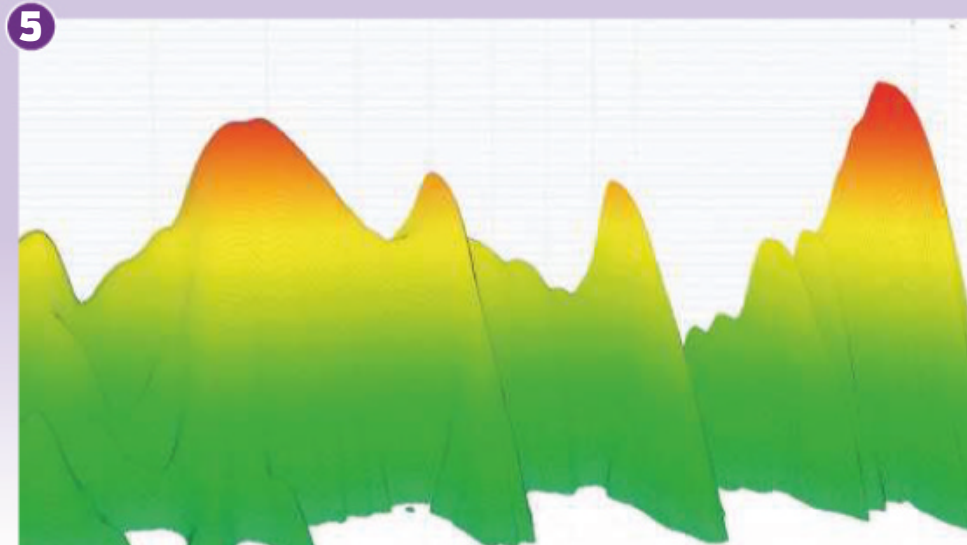


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4. Limiting the spectrum shown to 15Hz-500Hz lets you get a better idea of bass peaks and troughs. The nodes at 40Hz and 180Hz are clearly visible but notice how the smaller nodes at 60Hz and 90Hz also ring on considerably (C). These will all muddy the clarity and impact of low frequencies

5


5. Narrowing the focus to 20Hz-200kHz – prime cinema bass frequencies – is even more useful. Moving the speaker to shift large 40Hz and 180Hz nodes away from the listening position would stop the bass sounding too 'boomy', and applying bass traps to damp reverb at 60Hz and 90Hz would make the bass sound tighter





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Dutch courage

Daniel Sait reports on a custom cinema room that hides a 15-channel speaker system beneath its deluxe styling

KIT CHECKLIST

JVC: DLA-RS640 4K HDR projector

SCREEN EXCELLENCE: 3m-wide fixed-frame projector screen

TRINNOV: Altitude32 16-24 AV processor

PROCELLA AUDIO: 3 x DA-05DSP amplifiers; 1 x DA-06DSP amplifier; 3 x P610 speakers (LCR); 2 x P5V (front wide); 4 x P5V (surround); 2 x P5V (rear); 4 x P5iW (height); 1 x P18 subwoofer

LAB GRUPPEN: 3 x E10.4 power amplifiers

OPPO: UDP-203 Ultra HD Blu-ray player

APPLE: Apple TV 4K

SHUTTLE: Fanless multimedia PC

FURMANN: 2 x power management systems

ELAN: Control system

ARTNOVION: Acoustic treatments



DO NOT DISTURB

Bad Times at the El Royale checks in on 4K BD, p95



NETHERLANDS-BASED INSTALL OUTFIT Home Cinema Experience faced a few challenges to get this cinema ready to roll, particularly the shape of the initial room which meant both an entirely new wall and acoustic treatments were required. Fortunately, says installer Sebastiaan Kahle, the owner – who wanted a relaxing space to enjoy movies and music – put faith in their ability: 'After a presentation with [speaker brand] Procella we had a great conversation in our showroom... and were given a free rein.'

Technical plans outlining the cinema's eventual 11.1.4 speaker setup were created with the help of Procella and Trinnov Audio – whose Altitude32 processor was selected as 'the only choice to support the speaker configuration' – and provided the owner with a clear vision of what was to be delivered. Added to the hardware mix was a JVC 4K projector, 3m-wide projector screen and Oppo, Apple and media PC source gear.

The installers say they identify the five 'key elements' of a home cinema as audio, video, control, acoustics and interior, and the latter two certainly make their presence felt here. Side and rear walls feature Artnovion acoustic treatments that function as a design feature too, complementing the timber framework and soft furnishings ■

A. Get the big picture

The fixed-frame Screen Excellence screen with Neo-S acoustically transparent fabric measures three metres across

B. One sub's enough

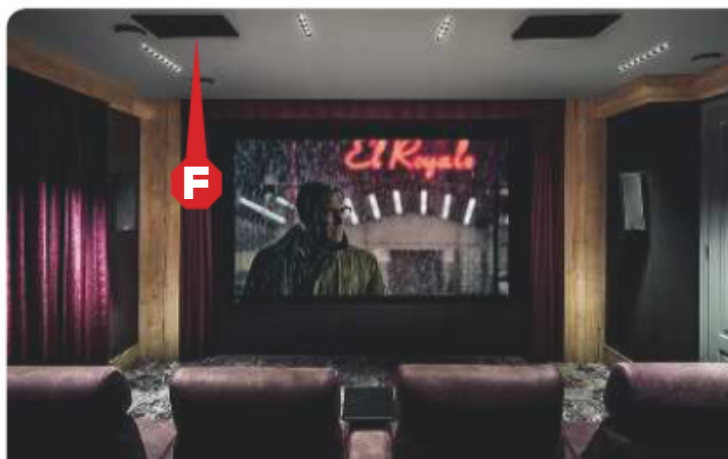
A baffle wall houses the front Procella speakers and the room's single (albeit dual 18in) subwoofer ➤



Prep work included building a new wall to give the room a better shape for acoustics, and to provide storage for the AV rack



Full calibration of the 11.1.4 speaker system was undertaken using Trinnov's Room Optimizer suite and eye-catching calibration microphone



C. Levelling lows

The eight full-size seats are placed on a riser for viewing accuracy/comfort – the riser also functions as a bass trap

D. Harnessing highs

The rear-wall acoustic treatments are known as 'Alps' diffusers due to their distinctive form, and work to scatter mid/high-frequency sound and reduce reflections

E. In the frame

Also assisting audio are these side-wall absorption panels, housed in bespoke frames

F. Creating an Atmosphere

The cinema's four height speakers are fitted in the ceiling. Also aiming down from above are LED lights

G. Box clever

The enclosure for the JVC RS-640 projector (2,000 Lumens) was custom-made and matches the cinema's striking décor

H. Hungry for power

Rack-mounted amps, including two-channel units from Procella and four-channel models from Swedish brand Lab Gruppen, deliver the juice for the 11.1.4 system



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A

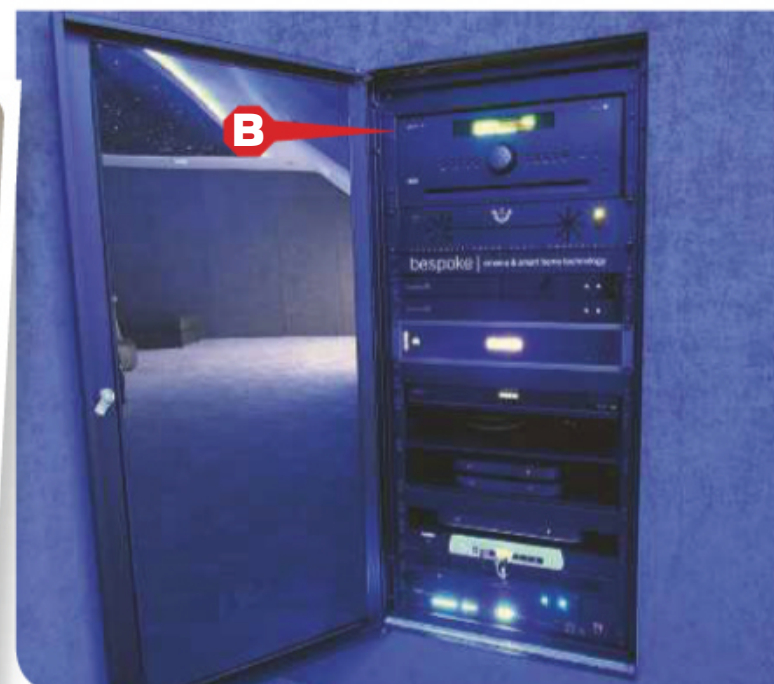
Let the fun and games begin



Doors at both ends of the room – and a pool table in the middle – meant the installers had to get creative when it came to cinema design



The system's single subwoofer (with quartet of 10in drivers) is mounted in-wall below the front LCR speakers



B



KIT CHECKLIST

SONY: VPL-VW550ES

4K HDR projector

DISPLAY TECHNOLOGIES:

3m-wide acoustically transparent 2.37:1 fixed-frame projector screen

ARCAM: AVR550 AV receiver

ARTCOUSTIC: 3 x Spitfire SL6-3

(LCR); 2 x Architect SL2-1

(Atmos channels); 2 x Target

(surrounds); Performance Series

subwoofer (4 x 10in drivers)

SONY: UBP-X1000ES Ultra HD

Blu-ray player

ROKU: 4K media streamer

HD CONNECTIVITY: 4K video

matrix

SKY: Sky Q PVR

CONTROL4: Automation

processor and scene lighting

STARSCAPE: Modular star ceiling

CUSTOM MADE: Arduino

computer and Neopixel

LED pool table

WHAT DO YOU do when you move into your new house and find the previous owner has left a pool table in the attic room? Turn it into a *Star Wars*-inspired media den, with 4K projection and immersive audio, and customise the table while you're at it. This was the brief given to Yorkshire-based installer Bespoke Home Cinemas, and the results are eye-catching.

The placement of the 3m-wide screen and opposite wall seating aren't where you'd naturally expect, but as the pool table had to be retained and the room has doors at both ends, designing the cinema across the room's shorter throw was the sensible option. A 5.1.2 speaker configuration using on-wall surrounds, in-ceiling heights and behind-screen positioning for LCR speakers and subwoofer (making use of the attic eaves) was chosen, with power and processing from an Arcam AVR550 receiver – the latter's Dirac room correction suite employed to tackle the cinema's unusual shape.

The table awakens

Adding to the room's galactic aesthetic are two key details. Firstly, a vast 8m x 2m fibre optic star ceiling, using modules from Starscape, was installed – surrounding it is an RGB 'halo frame'. This, plus additional lighting and AV operation, is handled by Control4 automation hardware.

And then there's the pool table. Aware that its original oak-effect styling wouldn't fit with the rest of the space, the installers opted to modify it by wrapping it with a carbon fibre film. Then, for a one-of-a-kind finishing touch, a custom-made microcomputer was installed, linked to LEDs in each of the table's pockets. Pot a ball and the pockets light up (one side 'dark', the other 'light'...), and a *Star Wars* movie quote emerges from the room's speaker array. Very smart.

Another essential (but invisible) feature is the treatment carried out at floor level. Working to reduce sound leakage to the bedrooms below (by 56dB, says the installer) is an under-carpet acoustic rubber matting system. Taking out skirting boards and fitting new flush doors also allowed acoustic treatment to the walls, finished in a stretched fabric ■

A. Wide-eyed

With the cinema room mainly intended for movie-watching, a 2.37:1 ratio screen was deemed suitable – and it fitted perfectly within the natural height created by the room's eaves

B. Secret storage

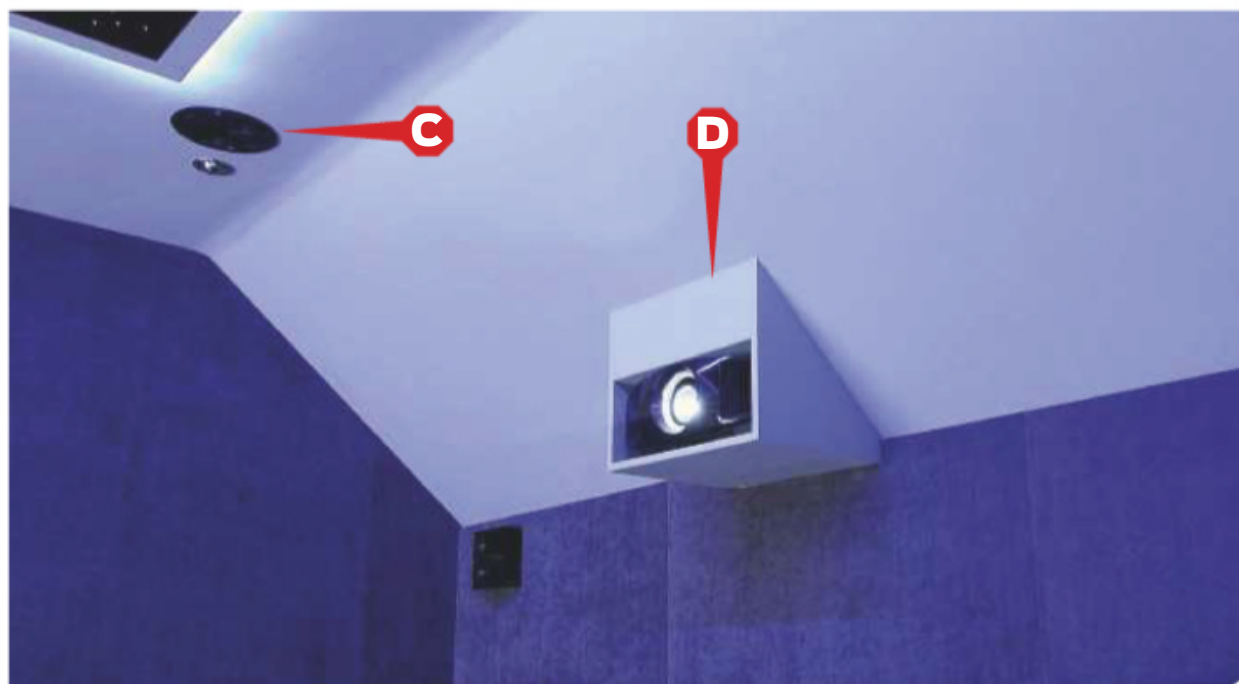
The in-wall space within the eaves came in handy when a location was required for the system's rack-mounted AV hardware. There's also a hidden fridge...

C. Atmos immersion

A pair of in-ceiling speakers handles the Atmos/DTS:X height layer, and is positioned to provide optimum coverage of the room's single row of seating

D. 4K in a box

The 4K HDR Sony projector is housed in a purpose-built enclosure that blends in with the rest of the space and enables the required throw ratio



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- | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| * Warner Bros | * Dreamworks | * DTS |
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| | * THX | |

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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE** SIM2 High-end 6,000 Lumens 4K HDR home cinema projector
PIONEER UDP-LX500 Ultra HD Blu-ray player **REL** 15in 'Predator' subwoofer **HARMAN KARDON**
 Multidriver premium soundbar **SAMSUNG** 75in 8K QLED TV **TEUFEL** 2.1-channel soundbar/
 subwoofer system **AMAZON** Echo Input **ROUNDUP** Portable Bluetooth speakers & MORE!

The 'i's have it

Q Acoustics tackles the sub-£1,000 speaker market with its 3010i Cinema Pack. Can it deliver a performance to match the gorgeous design? See p46 to find out...



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

John Archer believes this 4K projector breaks new HDR ground – which explains why it's so expensive

SIM2's 4K HDR superhero

SIM2's first foray into 4K and HDR projection fell a little flat by the Italian brand's usually supremely high standards. The Nero 4 [see *HCC* #279] didn't have the light management and, especially, processing flexibility to handle the strenuous demands of HDR's hugely expanded and often dramatically shifting light levels. Cue SIM2's eagerly awaited sophomore 4K HDR effort, the Nero 4S.

Here is a projector much more worthy of both SIM2's premium heritage, and its (take a deep breath) £30,000 asking price.

The changes between the Nero 4S and the original Nero 4 begin as soon as you look at it, thanks to a dramatic and huge red S that appears to the left of the new model's gaping lens.

SIM2 also now plants its branding and model name twice on the projector's front – one upside down for those who will be mounting the projector to a ceiling.

Otherwise the bodywork is the same: a large, heavy, extremely angular black box clad in a very fetching transparent glass finish. It certainly continues SIM2's history of producing projectors that can function as *objets d'art* as well as serious home cinema machines.

Let the light one in

It's what's going on inside the Nero 4S compared with its predecessor, though, that really matters to us. Significantly, SIM2 has upped the maximum brightness to a claimed 6,000 Lumens from the original Nero 4's 5,000. This puts it in a brightness league of its own for the price point. Even Sony's laser-driven VPL-VW870ES (£25,000) only musters 2,200 Lumens.

SIM2 has also introduced four new HDR settings calibrated to suit different screen sizes (choose from either 100in, 120in, 140in or 160in). Selecting the right option for your setup has a dramatic impact on picture quality, and is a feature I'd like to see other projector manufacturers introducing too.

Most importantly of all, though, SIM2 has completely overhauled the projector's handling

of HDR content. And it's here, as we'll see, that the really transformative stuff is going on.

The Nero 4S's connectivity matches that of its predecessor. This means you get three HDMI inputs where most projectors only manage two, although it's disappointing that only one of the HDMI inputs (HDMI 2, for some reason) is v2.0a and able to handle 4K and HDR signals. There is, though, a DisplayPort (highly unusual on a consumer product), as well as an HDMI output that provides a loopthrough from the third HDMI input.

Other connections are two 12V triggers, a VGA/component D-Sub input, an Ethernet port, a wired remote port, a USB service port, and an RS-232C control socket. Plenty for system integrators to get up and running with.

SIM2 partners the Nero 4S with the same plasticky, unhelpfully organised remote control it provided with the original Nero 4. I suppose, however, that this projector will almost exclusively find itself installed in a high-end home theatre environment where control will be handled by an external system. Indeed, some end users may never have need for the remote at all.

Some aspects of the Nero 4S's setup reflect the fact that it will likely be installed by a professional rather than yourself. The horizontal and vertical image shift adjustments, for instance, are tweaked via an Allen key inserted into holes on the projector's front. There's a hugely impressive amount of flexibility in these adjustments, as there is with the 1.96x optical zoom.

Installers will appreciate that the Nero 4S is compatible with SIM2's latest Live Colors Calibration software, to help get the optimum results for any room environment.



1. The remote could be more user-friendly, but at least it's backlit

2. The Nero 4S uses a new pure-glass lens and 'high-precision' optical system

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Ultra-bright native 4K projector with HDR playback

POSITION: The Nero 4S is SIM2's top 4K PJ, above the Crystal 4

PEERS: Sony VPL-VW870ES; JVC DLA-Z1



2



3



Dynamic diva

The huge performance improvements SIM2 has delivered with this S edition of the Nero 4 are apparent the moment you feed it a 4K HDR source. Straight away I clocked that the image's typical brightness level looks palpably higher – something that instantly makes HDR feel more convincing, and more of a step up from standard dynamic range.

Even more dramatically, the Nero 4S crafts remarkably extreme peak brightness levels, so that shots of direct sunlight, flickering flames, artificial lights and so on appear with a level of intensity that's staggering. These light peaks – even with content mastered to 4,000 nits, such as the 4K Blu-ray of *Pan* – are handled without succumbing badly to 'clipping' (lost subtle toning). The orange cloud sections as Peter first arrives in Neverland still glow a bit unnaturally, but nothing like as unconvincingly as they did on the first Nero 4. And this PJ handled almost every other bright HDR element that caused its predecessor trouble extremely effectively.

It's important to remember here that home cinema projectors are not ideally suited to HDR playback – it's a format chiefly designed for the very different

'The most spectacular 4K picture – and best argument for 4K tech – I've tested. Honestly, it's that good'

world of television screens. In terms of both its typical brightness level and its management of peak light areas, though, the Nero 4S is a class apart from any other projector I've seen.

Its best-in-breed brightness is joined by equally stunning sharpness. It uses a re-engineered, higher-quality lens than its forebear, and the extent to which this – together with SIM2's single-chip DLP optical system – helps the Nero 4S

4



render every tiny pixel of detail in a pristine 4K image is frankly incredible.

Mr Jang's shiny silver suit in *Lucy* (Ultra HD Blu-ray), boasts ultra-fine details and texture I've never noticed before. And when Lucy opens the briefcase that might have a bomb in it, you can see that the case lid is textured even from a distance – again something I've never been able to resolve on less-quality projectors.

Extrapolate this genuinely stunning level of detail reproduction across the whole image and you've got the most spectacular 4K picture – and best argument for 4K technology – I've tested. Honestly, it's that good. There's no hint of over-sharpness or forced edging, and the best-quality 4K BD images – such as *Lucy* and *John Wick 2* – just look real, for want of a better word.

Multicolour marvel

SIM2's Nero 4S is also a colour master with 4K HDR content. Due in part to its innate brightness, and in part to

its exceptionally deft colour rendering (even in its out of the box state), pictures look dynamic, vibrant, and enhanced beyond SDR (despite the projector not really having any wide colour technologies at its disposal). They're also utterly and completely natural. This holds true, moreover, regardless of whether you're watching the direct digital, mostly natural tones of *Lucy* or the deliberately over-wrought, thematically dramatic tones of the *Bad Times at the El Royale* Ultra HD Blu-ray.

I only noted extremely minor colour banding with HDR material, even during notoriously difficult shots, such as those featuring the aliens in their white room in *Arrival* (Ultra HD Blu-ray).

For most of the time – particularly with HDR material mastered to peaks of 1,000 nits (which much of it is) – black levels are far more satisfying than they were on the original Nero 4. Dark image areas look both convincing in their depth and full of shadow detail.

The PJ's impressive balance between light and dark is achieved without distracting interference from any dynamic iris (though I personally opted to use SIM2's Dynamic Contrast option).

Motion looks pretty convincing with 24p content too, aside from a touch of 'billowing' with vertical objects during camera pans. Don't bother with the onboard motion processing (Pure Motion, part of the Pure Engine suite), as this causes too many unwanted side effects for comfort, even on its lowest power setting.

Note that the Nero 4S handles 4K HDR at 60Hz perfectly comfortably using the HDMI 2 connection.

Dialling it down

Dragging myself away from the Nero 4S's HDR and 4K visuals, the news isn't quite so positive with HD SDR Blu-rays. The thing is, the key to its sparkling performance with HDR is that it's a light cannon beyond anything else in its price range. This means, though, that black levels with SDR content can look washed-out in comparison to rivals. And SDR playback means the projector doesn't have the punchy bright highlights of HDR to help counteract the lack of black depth.

Switching the SIM2's lamp to Eco helps, as does nudging the brightness down a point or two and narrowing the iris. But my overall impression is that while bright SDR/HD content looks good – rich and reasonably

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter (no glasses provided) **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG **CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs (one v2.0a); 1 x HDMI output (v1.4a); RS-232C; 2 x 12V triggers; VGA/component input; USB service port; Ethernet; DisplayPort input (v1.2) **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 6,000 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** N/A **ZOOM:** 1.96x **DIMENSIONS:** 528(w) x 215(h) x 582(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 32kg

FEATURES: Single-chip DLP; native 4K chipset; 450W lamp; vertical and horizontal optical image shifting; Live Colors Calibration 2.0 support; claimed 3,000-hour typical lamp life (Eco mode); 10 adjustable iris memories; different HDR settings for different sized screens; LED temperature indicator; Pure Engine adjustments

PARTNER WITH



FORTRESS SEATING: Put the SIM2 Nero 4S in a custom theatre and park yourself on a luxurious cinema recliner. Fortress Seating's Kensington model begins at around £3,200, with additional features (LED-lit cupholders) available.

(rather than emphatically) detailed – dark scenes struggle to completely convince, and it's here where I've felt it right to mark the Nero 4S down.

Black levels don't hit the sort of depths that JVC's non-laser D-ILA projectors do with HDR material, either. However, dark areas within HDR images are nuanced and deep enough to provide a likeable foundation to all that brightness; screen/push off the black bars when you're watching 2.40:1-ratio movies if you can.

There are other negatives to report. One is that I did occasionally notice DLP technology's rainbow effect, where stripes of red, green and blue appear momentarily over stand-out bright parts of the picture. To be fair, this problem didn't crop up as often as might be expected of a single-chip PJ running so brightly, but it was apparent with white on black content, such as the 'chapter headers' in *Bad Times at the El Royale* or the white space-ships against blackness in the 4K BD of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The Nero 4S's cooling fans run quite noisily in the Bright lamp setting required for HDR viewing. This is barely an issue, though, as prospective setups will likely have the PJ ceiling-mounted high above the seating position, or enclosed in its own hush box.

Finally, the Nero 4S is let down as a potential video gaming beast by a rather high input lag figure of 70ms, but I'm not sure console junkies are its target audience.

Hitting an HDR home run

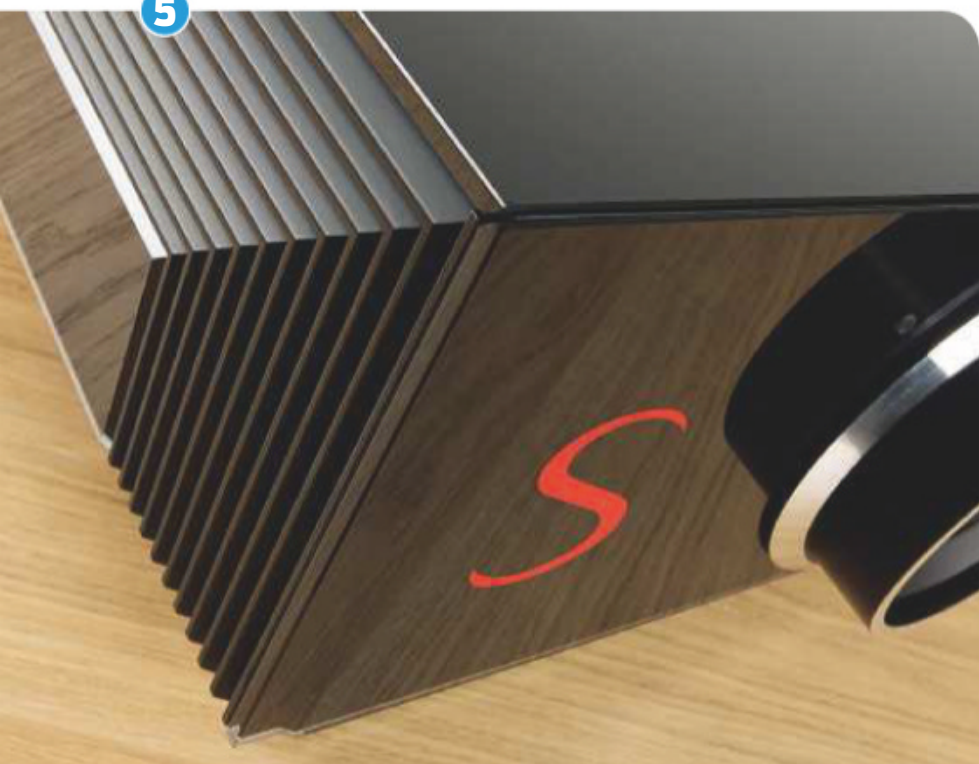
Feed the Nero 4S a diet of predominantly 4K HDR movies and TV dramas and none of the above niggles are a major distraction. During my audition, it routinely delivered far and away the most compelling, detailed and dynamic 4K HDR experience I've seen from any consumer PJ. That S must stand for Super... ■

3. Unusually, the PJ has three HDMI inputs (one for 4K HDR) and a loopthrough output

4. Side vents provide breathing space for the PJ's cooling fans

5. SIM2's 'S' branding is far from subtle...

5



HCC VERDICT



SIM2 Nero 4S

→ £30,000 → www.sim2.co.uk

WE SAY: While the Nero 4S is a bit lacking in black level with SDR sources, it's in an absolute class of its own with 4K HDR. Premium cinema owners should hunt one down.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Bookshelf 5.1
speaker pack

POSITION:
Entry-level 3000i
system

PEERS:
Monitor Audio
Bronze B1 AV;
SVS Prime 5.1

1. The 8in 3060S
woofer can be
wall-mounted with
an optional bracket

Mark Craven decides Q Acoustics' 3010i bundle is affordable 5.1 of the first order

Budget brilliance

When floorstanders are a no-go in your cinema room (most likely because it's actually also your living room) a bookshelf package can save the day. In this market, Brit audio brand Q Acoustics has something of a pedigree, and the 3010i 5.1 Cinema Pack is its latest consumer-friendly offering.

The 'i' suffix denotes this is an update on its previous 3000 series. The new 3000i lineup was actually launched last year – we previously tested the 3050i system [see HCC #287], which did use floorstander models (the 3050is, in fact) for the front left and right enclosures. This array takes the 3010i standmount/bookshelf speaker deployed on surround duty in that £1,350 package, and uses them for both front and rear. The possibility of a living room installation therefore increases, while the price dips to £900.

More than meets the 'i'

For this new 3000 Series generation, Q Acoustics has tweaked both the external design of the speakers and their internal architecture, improved the drivers and reworked the crossover of its two-way speakers.

The 3010i is the smallest of the new models (there's a larger 3020i standmount available), but is actually 25 per cent larger in cabinet volume than its predecessor – mainly by virtue of added depth – to engineer an improved bass performance from its coated paper-cone 4in woofer, and hit a claimed frequency response of 65Hz (-6dB), vital as the speaker is also sold for £200-per-pair for use in two-channel systems. This driver sits below a 0.9in soft dome tweeter, given a wide surround to increase dispersion.

Within the cabinet lurks a bracing technique the brand dubs P2P (Point to Point), something it first employed on its top-of-the-range Concept 500 floorstanders. This provides additional reinforcement to areas of the cabinet deemed necessary after computer modelling, aiming to reduce unwanted resonances.

For dialogue and cinematic bass, this system again uses Q Acoustics' 3090Ci centre channel and 3060S subwoofer. The former features a pair of the 4in midbass drivers flanking its tweeter; the latter tucks an 8in woofer and 150W amp into a briefcase-style enclosure designed to fit better into your lounge. The sub is sealed, whereas

the rest of the 3010i Cinema Pack is rear-ported – twice in the case of the 3090Ci.

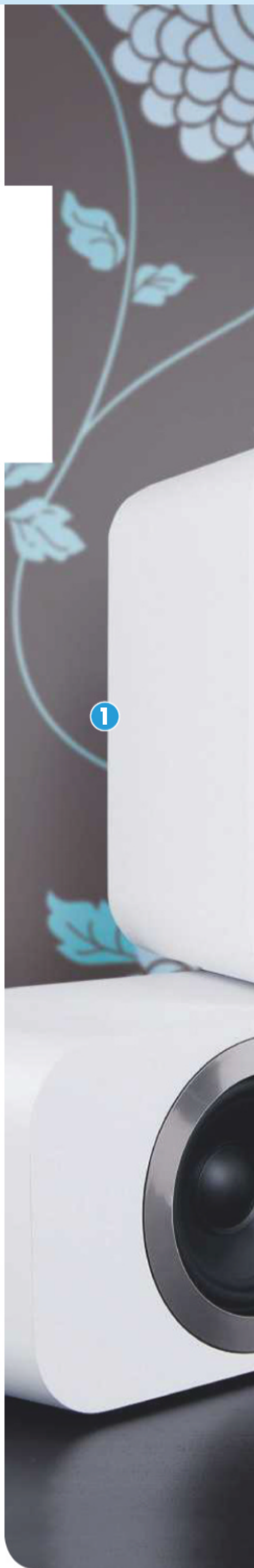
When it comes to styling, the attention to detail here really helps sell the 3010i 5.1 pack. The price tag may be less than a grand but the speakers look a million dollars. Smart design is something that Q Acoustics has always done well, and it's even more necessary in a system that has designs on living room acceptability. Ugly/practical looking cabinets don't present a problem in a dedicated cinema room, but they'd get funny looks in more domesticated setups. The silver trim rings, Q branding, curved corners and in-laid rear-panel terminals of the 3000i series speakers combine to create a great-looking setup, and the Arctic White finish of our review bundle is achingly cool too. Other options are Graphite Grey, English Walnut or Carbon Black.

With that added depth, the 3010i speakers aren't exactly diddy – this is a bigger proposition than a sub/sat system. Each has a quartet of rubber feet for mounting on shelves or TV furniture, but for more flexible system placement placing them on stands would make sense. The speakers (and sub) can also be wall-mounted.

'I've been riding shotgun'

This system earns its stripes by matching its style with substance. For the asking price, it barely puts a foot wrong.

I began using the L/R front pair for stereo music playback – an *hors d'oeuvre* before the main course – and it became quickly clear that the 3010i is pretty special. With Pink Floyd's *Comfortably Numb* (Tidal Hi-Fi), it resolves the finer details of the mix, such as the delicacy of drummer Nick Mason's hi-hat, while bringing a rich warmth and decent heft to the track's bassy swells. David Gilmour's legendary solo sounds sweet, pure and refined. Switch to something more upbeat – George Ezra's *Shotgun* (CD) – and punch and rhythm comes to the fore. What's lacking is the dramatic scale and room-filling power of a floorstander – but then this system has four





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more boxes to call upon to help out (indeed, a benefit of having identical speakers for front L/R and surround L/R is that, if you like to listen to music this way, putting your AVR into party/all-channel stereo mode is something of a treat).

First off the Blu-ray shelf was *WALL-E* (Blu-ray). This has a complex but at times delicate mix, with exquisite spot effects, a lush, orchestral score, and organic and electronic-flavoured dialogue. The 3010i pack captures the mix's subtleties and nuances – the beeps and whirrs of the Axiom ship's robots, the metallic clanks of *WALL-E*'s caterpillar track – and has the balance and believability of tone to bring out the film's drama. When the eponymous hero and EVE are almost sucked into outer space via the gigantic garbage disposal, the sound of rushing air swirls around the room with an icy chill.

‘Putting it simply, this is a barnstorming budget system from Q Acoustics, with smart design and sweet sonics’

Dialogue delivery is excellent, with a forthright presentation courtesy of the 3090Ci's twin midbass configuration. The speaker slips between the L/R pair almost unnoticed; LCR pans seem uniform.

The system's musicality is put to good use by Thomas Newman's score, which frequently uses plaintive, mid-range string notes and deeper bass stabs. In fact, it's consistently excellent with soundtracks, showcasing a refinement I simply wasn't expecting at the price. The 3010i transitions from low bass to the higher registers without any obvious gap or exaggeration, revealing remarkable tuning and accomplished cabinet build.

Wonder Woman (Ultra HD Blu-ray) effectively results in more of the same aural enjoyment. The heroine's theme tune (electric cello!) sounds majestic, and the system's deftness, balance and high-end clarity – treble detailing is smooth and pleasing on the ear – enlivens the film's surround sound environments. But it's not all about subtlety; this system can get theatrical when required.

During the film's airfield battle climax, Q Acoustics' curious-shaped subwoofer puts in a shift. The rumble

SPECIFICATIONS

3010i
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in midbass driver; 1 x 0.9in soft dome tweeter **ENCLOSURE:** Rear-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 65Hz-30kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 86dB **POWER HANDLING:** 125W **DIMENSIONS:** 150(w) x 253(h) x 252(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4.1kg

3090Ci
DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 4in midbass drivers; 1 x 0.9in soft dome tweeter **ENCLOSURE:** Twin rear-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 75Hz-30kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 89dB **POWER HANDLING:** 165W **DIMENSIONS:** 430(w) x 152(h) x 216(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 6kg

3060S (subwoofer)
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8in paper cone bass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 35Hz-250Hz **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 150W Class D amplifier **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 480(w) x 300(h) x 150(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 8.5kg **FEATURES:** LFE input; stereo phono input; auto on/off; crossover and level controls; phase switch; supplied with spikes; removable connections cover

PARTNER WITH



Q ACOUSTICS 3000i STANDS: Designed to fit the 3010i and 3090Ci models in this array (plus the 3020i standmount), these stands sell for £150-per-pair. They're available in both black and white, stand around 70cm high, and come with spikes.

of an airplane engine and the throaty roar of the flames enveloping Ares have genuine low-frequency presence. When Wonder Woman is thrown to the ground or the big baddie cleaves the runway with his giant sword, the impacts hit with a pleasing, potent thwack. Amidst this, crackling FX and Ares' rambling end-of-the-world monologue remain clear.

In an ideal world the 3060S sub would be more detailed and attack bass hits with the aggression and voluminous nature shown, for instance, by the 10in-driver SW-10 bundled with Wharfedale's Diamond 11 HCP. But, as it is, it integrates so well with the rest of the overall soundfield that I'd be loathe to upset the apple cart. It's by no means a weak link.

I ended my testing with a re-run of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Sky Cinema) and eventually gave up taking notes, preferring instead to just watch the movie and enjoy the all-round brilliance of the 3010i 5.1. My listening room was alive with screeching TIE Fighters, scatter-fire dialogue and a howling Wookiee...

No complaints

Putting it simply, this is a barnstorming budget system from Q Acoustics, with smart-looking cabinets serving up sweet sonics. Certainly, its scale is suited to small/medium spaces, and you can make the case that it plays it safe when it comes to LFE aggression – but when 'safe' sounds as good as this, I really can't complain ■

2. Unlike the spring-loaded posts on Q Acoustics' 7000i sub/sat system, these terminals accept 4mm banana plugs



HCC VERDICT

★★★★★

Q Acoustics 3010i 5.1 Cinema Pack
→ £900 → www.qacoustics.co.uk

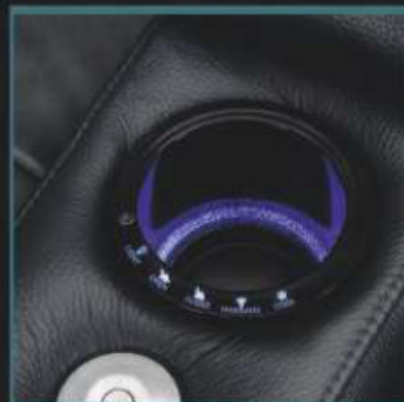
WE SAY: The 3010i system is impressive all-round, from styling to surround delivery. An essential audition for those shopping for 5.1 below £1,000.

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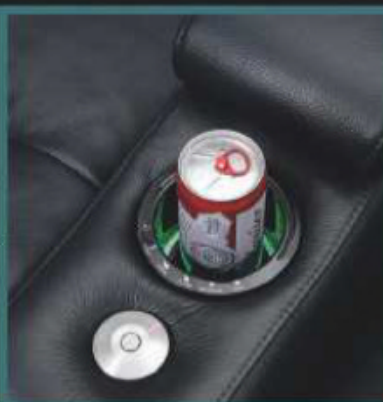
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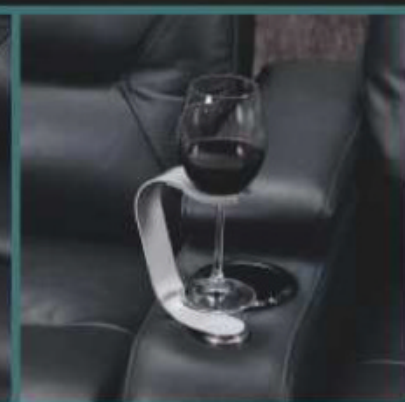
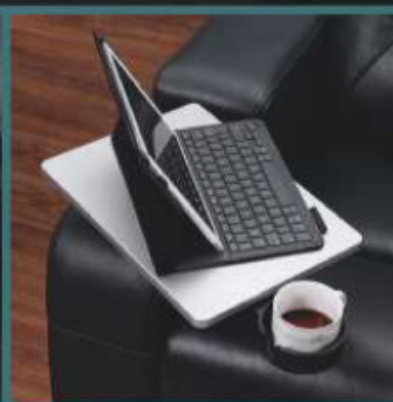
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REL bass gets better by the minute

Richard Stevenson was so excited to audition REL's new Predator subwoofer that he forgot to dig out his own *Predator* UHD Blu-ray...



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
15in home cinema
subwoofer

POSITION:
Top of REL's Serie
HT (Home Theatre)

PEERS:
SVS SB-4000;
REL S/3 SHO;
Bowers & Wilkins
DB3D

HOME
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RECOMMENDED

PREDATOR? EVEN IF the word is a noun, naming a subwoofer after one of the most iconic action thrillers of all time is brave. Yet REL's new HT/1508 Predator might just have all the right ingredients to pull it off.

This dedicated LFE beast packs a bespoke 15in driver and 850W amp into a (relatively) compact, sealed cabinet. The plain black finish, lack of frills and phono-only inputs keep the cost down to £1,600, allowing the HT/1508 to stealth into the mid-market jungle and hope to invisibly pick off similar-price but lower-spec subs.

An introduction to REL's new model comes from company head John Hunter, who explains the Serie HT ethos: 'Whereas traditional RELs are asked to be fantastic all-rounders, the HT (Home Theatre) range is designed to focus on one task, LFE, and do it perfectly. We designed an all-new 15in driver with 3in of stroke fore-and-aft but, as with all REL driver designs, our focus remains on speed and articulation, not just boom.'

That 15in CarbonGlas driver is pretty special. Around 60 per cent of the surface is carbon fibre backed by a lightweight glass fibre mix. The result is a stiff and light cone, terminated with a butyl rubber roll surround, that should deliver super-fast transients with no overhang if given enough power – which is where the 850W NextGen5 Class D amp comes in, an upgrade on the 500W version found in REL's 12in HT/1205 model [see HCC #290].

Next to the usual bespoke furniture REL cabinets, the HT series is... homely. I wouldn't go as far as wheeling out Arnie's comment on the comeliness of the Predator (Google it, with safe search off) but let's agree the HT/1508 looks purposeful rather than pretty. The textured matte black cabinet is a slightly flattened cube with profiled side edges and fronted with a hefty MDF-framed grille. It's not particularly large for a 15in woofer and camouflages well in the shadows of a darkened cinema room.

The cabinet is not as plain as you might think though. It's extensively braced internally, feeling very inert to a tap on the side, and the glossy top is a 12mm-thick plate of glass that aids with damping the cabinet, says REL. The feet double as stacking rails – if you want even more LFE impact, you can sit HT/1508s on top of each other.

'The HT/1508 is as brutal as its billing – the sound is fast, fluid and blessed with trouser-flapping punch'

The amp panel board takes up much of the sub's rear, although the connection and control count is frugal. You get stereo phono inputs and one balanced XLR input (not a feature of the smaller Serie HT models), plus balanced and unbalanced outputs for daisy-chaining. Controls are as basic as they get; auto power on, phase switch, gain and crossover knobs.

There are no speaker-level inputs, no 12V or IR triggers, no networking connections, no user EQ system and no remote control. While there are plenty of subs around £1,500 that will give you some of those features, none do it with a 15in custom driver and 850W digital amp tuned for purely home cinema use.

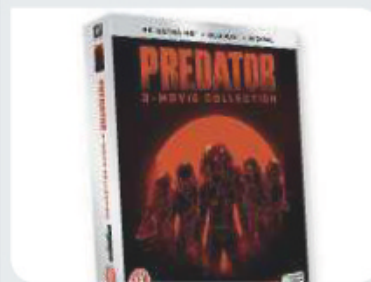
And this unfrivolous spec does at least make setup fairly simplistic, compared to subs with baffling EQ where if you lose it you are in a world of hurt. There was some

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 15in front-firing CarbonGlas woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 22Hz (-6dB) **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 850W NextGen5 Class D amplifier **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 500(w) x 450(h) x 480(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 36kg

FEATURES: Balanced XLR input; balanced XLR output; stereo phono input; stereo phono output; LFE input; variable crossover; level; 0/180-degrees phase switch; auto standby feature; claimed 3in driver excursion

PARTNER WITH



PREDATOR 3-MOVIE COLLECTION: *Predator*, *Predator 2* and *Predators* are bundled together in this 4K boxset, with the 1987 original particularly benefitting from a more authentic transfer than the previous DNR'd Blu-ray.

moving the unit around, flipping of phase switch and setting the gain level by ear before letting my AV receiver sort out the crossover.

Payback time

The opening scenes of *Ready Player One* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) were enough to reveal that the HT/1508 was as brutal as its billing.

Spielberg's thrashing street-car race is delivered with a maelstrom of LFE across engine roars, crashes and leaping giant apes hitting the track. The sound is fast, fluid and blessed with trouser-flapping punch.

Switching to more subtle content is interesting. The HT/1508 is quiet, eerily so. I'm used to having a high-level input to a REL sub, hooked up to the main left/right channel outputs to bolster scale at the front of the room. With just LFE going to the woofer (front speakers set to 'large'), the REL loiters silently in the cinema, ready to strike at any hint of sub-bass action.

Deep rumbling effects are like being washed over by a wave of LF that seems to bypass the ears and go straight for your wobbly, fleshy bits. Soundtracks have thunderous basslines, encouraging me to dig out the subterranean nightclub scene in *Blade* (DVD). The thumping track is engagingly solid and, while other RELs definitely have a little more grace with music, there's no denying the HT/1508 delivers what the director intended from the scene; visceral and engaging bass.

For a REL, a brand born in sub-bass systems for music, a dedicated LFE sub is something of single-minded departure. Yet, just like the smaller HT Series we've looked at, the HT/1508 offers unrivalled value in setting out its fast, high-impact and incredibly powerful cinema sound without frills or features. A REL S/3 SHO costs exactly the same and arguably offers much more all-round appeal – but don't expect it to move your gizzards and blow out the windows like this big-game hunter ■

1. 15in is the largest driver REL uses across its subwoofer ranges

HCC VERDICT



REL HT/1508 Predator

→ £1,600 → www.rel.net

WE SAY: REL's HT flagship is a powerful, purposeful, dedicated home cinema sub, eschewing features and fancy finishes in favour of outstanding LFE performance.



Dolby Atmos may not feature, but the premium Enchant 1300 soundbar still grabs **Jamie Biesemans'** attention

Perfect Harman-y?

After a period of relative quiet, Harman (now owned by Samsung) is re-entering the soundbar market in a big way, both with its Enchant series and Citation Bar. Yet although the Enchant 1300 shares some features with the trendier-looking Citation, it is a very different beast.

With that £900 price tag in mind, I'll outline what the 'bar doesn't do. Most obviously, the Enchant 1300 doesn't offer Dolby Atmos or DTS:X support (nor does the Citation Bar, for that matter). This is a bold move, considering many competitors do. Usually they'll throw in a wireless subwoofer as well, and the option to expand a system with

wireless rear speakers. Harman Kardon eschews all of this here, instead sticking to 'old school' virtual surround sound.

Premium build

Some people choose their TV audio boosters for their looks first and performance second. Helpful then, that there's no denying the Enchant 1300 is extremely well styled and built. A brushed metal graphite finish transitions sleekly to a cloth wrap around the rest of the soundbar, by way of a neat shiny chamfer. You'll find the same chamfer around the bar's two side ports and its four control buttons, while a white OLED display hides behind the cloth on the front. This only lights up when you change a setting, such as volume, and is right out of Samsung's 'how to build a



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Multi-driver
soundbar with
4K HDMI switching

POSITION:
Top-of-the-line
Harman Kardon
soundbar for 2019

PEERS:
Samsung HW-N850;
LG SK8Y;
Bluesound Pulse

1. Behind the cloth wrap are 11 front-facing drive units

2. Use the remote to kickstart the bar's auto calibration mode

soundbar' handbook, as this feature has been part of the Korean giant's offerings for ages. All this luxurious curviness makes the Enchant 1300 one of the prettiest models around, and the smooth edges and finish also ensure it remains relatively unobtrusive, despite being designed for 55in and above screens. It's quite a contrast with, say, the angular design of Samsung's HW-N950.

But is it all form above function? No. Harman Kardon might not embrace Dolby Atmos, but there are features which promise impressive sound delivery. The main one is Multibeam Surround Sound, which utilises 11 front-facing drivers, plus two more side-mounted units, to simulate a surround setup, described as 13-channel.

This is complemented by an AMC (Automatic Multibeam Calibration) function to tune Multibeam to your room size and layout. AMC doesn't require faffing around with a plug-in microphone – just press a button on the remote and endure 15 seconds of test sounds bouncing around the room. I found AMC to be quite effective, although it did dampen the higher bass frequencies more than I liked, possibly overcompensating for a room node.

There's no easy way to switch the AMC-calibrated sound on and off, but there are four AMC sound modes (Music, Movie, Voice and Personal). In the Personal Mode you can adjust the amount of bass and save the setting to one of four preset buttons on the remote. Want to get rid of AMC? You'll have to return to factory settings.

The absence of Atmos upfiring means you can place the Enchant 1300 under your screen, TV stand allowing. At the same time placement remains important, as the side-facing speakers need to be unobstructed.

In and out

I can't really fault the Enchant 1300 when it comes to connectivity. Three HDMI inputs and one ARC-compatible output, all 4K and HDR ready, are what you would expect in this price bracket. There are also optical and analogue audio connections, and a USB port to play music files.

There's no controlling app, with Harman Kardon favouring Google Chromecast integration over a proprietary streaming platform. This isn't bad news at all, as it makes the Enchant 1300 compatible with a wide range of streaming services, including Spotify, and introduces voice control if you have another Google product with a microphone hanging around, plus Chromecast multiroom. The downside is that few functions can be controlled through the Google Home app, so keep the Enchant 1300's well-designed remote handy.

During testing I combined the soundbar for a while with the optional Enchant Subwoofer (£620), which is compatible with both the Enchant 1300 and its step-down eight-driver Enchant 800 soundbar sibling. The sub is a neat style match (again featuring a cloth wrap) and rather large courtesy of its 10in driver.





3

In use it impresses, blessed with sufficient power (it packs a 200W amp) to deliver impactful bass while retaining a sense of detail. Compared to average soundbar subs, which often emit directional frequencies far above 80Hz and ruin the surround experience, it's highly commendable. But the price tag (approaching 70 per cent of the cost of the 'bar) doesn't make it easy to recommend, despite its LFE talents.

Racing flat-out... but not flat

The Ultra HD Blu-ray of Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* has a scintillating Dolby Atmos soundtrack, especially the road race sequences that are jam-packed with explosions, metallic impacts and the sounds of Parzival grabbing virtual coins from crashed Sixers. There's a lot of height information here, and not surprisingly the Enchant 1300 doesn't reproduce it as an Atmos setup would. However, it doesn't sound flat.

The soundfield the Enchant 1300 creates is expansive, relaying a lot of onscreen movement and capturing fine details through crisp, tangible treble. Rear-channel info doesn't magically emanate from behind, but front-to-back pans translate quite well into a steerage away from the screen. Bass is tight, fast and controlled, helping to keep everything moving along. There's a potent dynamism, and the 'bar is well-balanced across the frequency range, adding to a realistic presentation.

The ten drivers and single tweeter on the front of the soundbar are grouped in three clusters for left/centre/right. This enables noticeable channel separation: discrete but still seamless. Dialogue is presented crisply and distinctly.

These traits also make it superb for music playback, which isn't only relevant for casual Bluetooth or Chromecast listening. The Enchant 1300 shines with music-laden movies such as *Atomic Blonde* (Ultra HD Blu-ray), where Charlize Theron does a Debbie Harry

4



SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 10 x 2in midbass units; 2 x 1in side-firing drivers; 1 x 0.75in central tweeter **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 120W **CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs; 1 x HDMI ARC output; 1 digital optical audio input; 1 x 3.5mm input; 1 x USB **DOLBY ATMOS/DTS:X:** No/No **SEPARATE SUB:** Optional Enchant Subwoofer, with 10in woofer and claimed 200W integrated amp **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 1,120(w) x 65(h) x 125(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 5.65kg

FEATURES: Chromecast Built-in; Google Assistant-compatible; Multibeam Surround Sound; Automatic Multibeam Calibration; 4K HDR passthrough over HDMI; Bluetooth; dual-band Wi-Fi; Movie, Music, Voice and Personal presets; wall-mountable; USB file playback supports 192kHz FLAC and WAV

PARTNER WITH



SAMSUNG QE65Q8: This second-tier 4K QLED (below the Q9) is available in both edge-lit (Q8FN, £2,200) and direct-lit (Q8DN, £2,300) iterations, and brings high brightness and rich colours to HDR playback, plus a slick smart platform and UI.

impression while knocking sense into Cold War spooks to a 1980s euro-pop soundtrack. And during that film's savage staircase fight sequence, the Enchant 1300 convincingly delivers every crunch, punch and body slam, with a good sense of depth and directionality. At this point, the lack of height channels isn't really a concern; this soundbar captivates through other means.

Almost enchanted

Overall, the Enchant 1300 is impressive. Before the arrival of Dolby Atmos, it would have been best-in-class. And, in a way, it still is: it's attractive, it's dynamic and detailed with movies, and it's excellent with music. In a smaller room, you probably wouldn't even require the separate subwoofer. But the Enchant 1300 carries a premium price tag on its own, and if you want the extra bass presence the sub provides, the cost really starts to add up ■

HCC VERDICT



Harman Kardon Enchant 1300
→ £900 → www.harmankardon.co.uk

WE SAY: This gorgeous soundbar has the performance prowess to justify its premium billing, but there's strong competition at this price point.

- 3. On-body controls are power, volume and source selection
- 4. Each end features a side-firing driver



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Flying the flag for universal audio

Pioneer's UDP-LX500 slashes the asking price of its flagship brethren but still promises a premium mix of movie and music playback. [Steve May](#) reports

AFTER PIONEER TEASED a new Ultra HD Blu-ray player lineup last Summer, the UDP-LX500 was the first one to break cover. The brand then followed with the launch of a higher-end machine, the UDP-LX800, which actually made it to my test bench first [see HCC #293]. Now I'm sitting down with the deck that got AV enthusiasts excited in the first place. I'm starting to feel spoilt for choice.

It may lack the apocalypse-proof build of the flagship £2,200 UDP-LX800, but there's nothing lightweight about this (considerably) more affordable model's design. The deck can bow furniture at 10.3kg, sharing similar chassis-strengthening flourishes and quartet of isolating feet as its bigger brother, and is physically larger than its nearest rival, the Panasonic DP-UB9000 [see HCC #292]

That said, it doesn't quite have the same quality of finish as the Panasonic or indeed Pioneer's own range-topper. It has weight but lacks their finesse.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Premium universal
UHD Blu-ray player

POSITION:
A rung down from
the flagship
UDP-LX800

PEERS:
Panasonic
DP-UB9000;
Sony UBP-X1000ES

Fully featured

The UDP-LX500's specification has been crafted with AV enthusiasts in mind. This 4K player is HDR10 and Dolby Vision-capable out of the box, and there's a firmware update for HDR10+ scheduled to arrive in the next few months. Significantly, it also boasts universal audio playback,

which means it's compatible with Super Audio CD and DVD-A discs, as well as vanilla CDs. It'll also handle 3D Blu-rays, standard DVDs, plus hi-res audio files. Basically it'll play pretty much everything except LaserDiscs – but you've got to draw the line somewhere.

Rear connections include two HDMI (one for combined sound and vision, the other for separated audio if you need to bypass your AVR and route video directly to a UHD screen). There are also digital audio optical and coaxial outputs, Ethernet for networking, and RS-232C for pro installs with integrated control. USB ports are supplied front and back.

An obvious difference from the UDP-LX800 is the analogue audio output, which here runs to stereo phono but not balanced XLR. Internally, there are differences too – the dual SABRE ES9026 PRO DACs of the pricier model are replaced by an AKM AK4490EQ unit, and the signal path refinements of the UDP-LX800 (based around techniques developed for Pioneer's PD-70AE Super Audio CD player) aren't carried over. Power supply, digital processing, and analogue audio have all still been separated, though, for enforced purity.

The UDP-LX500 has the same user interface as its step-up model, which is a bare-bones affair. The Home Menu is dull and simplistic, not least because the player lacks any integrated streaming services or apps. Pioneer obviously assumes we have access to this sort of functionality elsewhere (and, to be honest, it's almost certainly right).





Happily though, one of the innovations introduced on its more expensive stablemate is carried through. Hold down the Display button, and you'll unlock MaxFALL (Maximum Frame Average Light Level) and MaxCLL (Maximum Content Light Level) information, as read from HDR10 metadata on compatible UHD platters.

Disc loading speeds are little better than average. The deck took my reference movie Blu-ray from tray to

'Compatibility with SACD and DVD-A, alongside hi-res audio, make this a fine choice for a top-flight AV system'

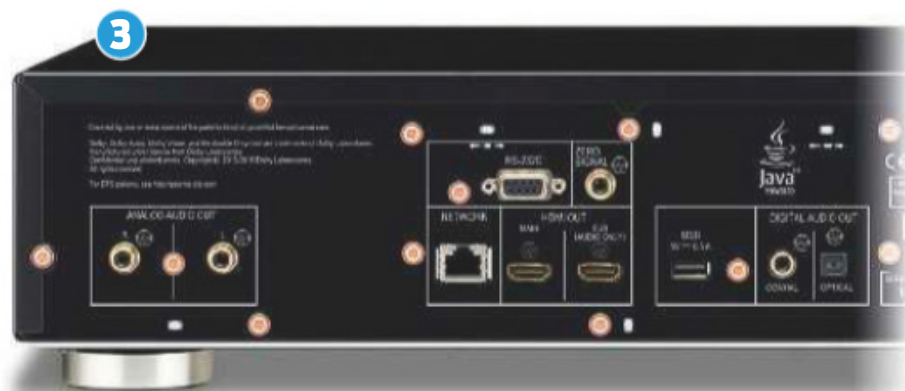
main menu in just over 40 seconds. That said, the tray loader is as smooth as butter, and the deck itself supremely quiet in operation.

A feast for the eyes

If you come to the UDP-LX500 expecting jaw-dropping video quality you'll not be disappointed. Its images exhibit superb detail, with bit-smooth colour rendering that gives an almost intangible sense of depth to visuals. The scene-setting space battle in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) is a thing of beauty, while *A Quiet Place* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) hints at horror in low-level shadow detail.

The player dispenses wide colour and HDR impacts with delicious generosity. Helpfully, the video output can also be matched to different display technologies: LCD and OLED TVs, and projectors.

Indeed, its video performance is subjectively no different to that of its UDP-LX800 stablemate, which sells for twice as much.



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes **ULTRA HD:** Yes **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; Dolby Vision; HDR10+ (via future firmware update) **UPSCALING:** Yes. 2,160p **MULTIREGION:** No. Region B BD/R2 DVD **HDMI:** Yes. 2 x outputs **MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE OUTPUT:** No. Stereo phono **DIGITAL AUDIO OUTPUT:** Yes. 1 x optical digital audio; 1 x coaxial digital audio **ETHERNET:** Yes **BUILT IN WI-FI:** No **SACD/DVD-A:** Yes/Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 435(w) x 118(h) x 337(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 10.3kg

FEATURES: 2 x USBs; RS-232C control; media playback supports MP3, WMA, ALAC, AIFF, WAV, FLAC, DSD (2.8MHz and 5.6MHz); media display screen including MaxFALL and MaxCLL; PQLS (Precision Quartz Lock System) jitter reduction

PARTNER WITH



PIONEER SC-LX901: Stick to Pioneer for processing to use the brand's PQLS anti-jitter tool. The top-of-the-range SC-LX901 sells for around £2,000, and packs 11 Class D amplifier channels to complement its DTS:X and Dolby Atmos decoding.

In a forensic shootout with its slightly cheaper rival, the Panasonic DP-UB9000, it comes a very close second. After comparing both players with a variety of test images, I came to the conclusion that the Panasonic has the edge when it comes to interpolation techniques. Both decks upsample HD and UHD discs to 4:4:4 colour, but Panasonic's approach offers smoother colour detailing. But with real world content any differences are largely inconsequential.

Where the UDP-LX500 clearly trumps the Panasonic is audio; it's a considerably better music player, and while that broad compatibility with SACD and DVD-A will appeal to those with investment in those disc formats, it's also more accomplished with regular CDs. The player has an engaging organic audio quality, which really seems to help 16-bit discs. Pioneer's UDP-LX800 is even better, but the higher up the performance chain you go, the benefits become disproportionately smaller.

User tweaks include a trio of digital filtering modes named Sharp Roll-Off, Short Delay and Slow Roll-Off – I never really arrived at any preference, but I amused myself trying – and Pioneer's PQLS (Precision Quartz Lock System), which combats timing errors over HDMI, but only when the player is used with a compatible Pioneer AVR.

Leading contender

If you feared that the era of high-end universal UHD disc players was all but over, following the exit of fan-boy favourite Oppo, then breathe easy. This Pioneer is every bit a comparable performer. Image quality is excellent and its music playback outstanding. Compatibility with SACD and DVD-A, alongside hi-res audio, make this a fine choice for a top-flight sound and vision system. Those after an upgrade from a premium Blu-ray player to 4K (with wide HDR support) should consider it a leading contender ■

1. A similar design to the UDP-LX800, but not quite as big and heavy

2. The remote is backlit and sports a brushed-effect finish

3. The player's analogue stereo output is tethered to an AKM DAC

HCC VERDICT



Pioneer UDP-LX500

→ £1,000 → www.pioneer-audiovisual.eu

WE SAY: Offering universal audio compatibility, superior build quality and excellent video, this is a premium player to lust after – even without any integrated apps.



**SPACE
COWBOY**

Ryan Gosling stars
as Neil Armstrong
in *First Man* on
4K Blu p92

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RECOMMENDED

One for the future

Is 8K really worth getting excited about? After checking out Samsung's latest 75in 8K TV, **John Archer** thinks it probably is

WITH NATIVE 8K content potentially years away – and with no obvious method of delivery – plus the concept of 4K still filtering through, consumers seem understandably sceptical about investing in an 8K-resolution display. First-generation models, where Samsung is leading the charge with its Q900R series, are for early adopters and those with sizeable budgets. The 75in Samsung QE75Q900R, however, joins the previously reviewed QE85Q900R [see HCC #292] in proving that 8K TVs do have a point even now beyond mere future-proofing. Put another way, you don't need to wait for 7,680 x 4,320 material to put an 8K display to good use.

Meet Mr Big

The first thing you notice about the QE75Q900R, though, is not how many pixels it has, but how heavy it is. If your body's got any weak bits, setting up this TV will find them.

It's also chunky by today's standards, seemingly sharing the same diet as Samsung's 4K QLED models. Yet while potentially irritating for people who wall-mount their TVs, I personally don't mind the bulk. Much of it is down to the implementation of an advanced direct backlighting system, supported by 480-zone local dimming, and –

all things being equal – I'd rather have this than an on-trend slender design.

The QE75Q900R also has two design flourishes to make it more welcome in your living room. First, it uses an external connections box attached to the TV via a slim, almost transparent cable. Second, a low-powered Ambient Mode can replace the usual gaping black screen when the TV's not being watched with either digital artworks or your own photographs.

Of more interest to AV addicts will be the TV's staggering claimed brightness of 4,000 nits, which aims to work in tandem with its precise light control to allow HDR to flourish, and meet the peak light values of today's most aggressively mastered HDR content.

The QE75Q900R uses Samsung's unique QLED technology, which sees Quantum Dots shrouded in metal. This, says the brand, enables them to be driven harder to produce higher brightness and richer colours with HDR10, HDR10+ and HLG sources. (Dolby Vision is not supported.)

A fly in the ointment is that this QLED currently only features HDMI 2.0 inputs, meaning it can't accept the full 48Gbps feeds associated with 8K video at 50/60Hz

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
75in 8K LCD TV using
Samsung's QLED
technology

POSITION:
The very top of the
current QLED range

PEERS:
Samsung
QE75Q9FN;
Sony KD-75ZF9

via HDMI 2.1. Rival brand LG is gearing up to ship its 8K OLED (the Z9) with HDMI 2.1 out of the box; Samsung is promising a new connections box later in 2019 sporting a full-speed HDMI 2.1 port, which Q900R owners can get free on request.

While that will bring the benefits of the 2.1 specification, it's not clear right now what external 8K sources this connection might be useful for. In fact, there are currently no real-world 8K sources the QE75Q900R can play. Even YouTube's 8K videos don't work.

For audio, Samsung offers a Smart Sound processing engine that does a good job of altering the tone of the sound based on the content you're watching. But its overall audio performance is fair to middling. The integrated speaker system doesn't project very well, leaving film soundtracks feeling slightly swallowed and inward-looking.

Resolutionary

Native 8K video available for this test was a series of Samsung demonstration sequences provided on USB. As a caveat, note that such supplied footage is always crafted to look spectacular – but there's no denying that's what it does.

Detail levels, particularly with shots across a cityscape, go clearly beyond what you witness on a 4K TV. This can be seen both in small texturing, such as brickwork, and in the overall sense of image depth. There's no hint of jagged diagonal or curved edges, even if you get much closer to the screen than anyone sensibly would. The boosted pixel density also creates a more realistic impression – that all-important sense that you're looking through a window.

The 8K impact isn't quite as dramatic here – understandably – as it was on the more immersive canvas of Samsung's 85in 85Q900R. But there is a difference, and it enables this largescreen TV to achieve the same sort of pixels-per-inch image density you get with small 4K mastering monitors.

With more widely available 4K content, this TV's upscaling capabilities are all important. Just as well, then, that they're very impressive.

Good-quality 4K sources (think Ultra HD Blu-ray) actually look slicker than they do on the vast majority of native 4K TVs, with less noise, more pixel density, and more detail. And these improvements are delivered without the stressy lines and shimmering over fine detailing that can appear on 4K displays if you're not judicious with their sharpness settings.

The upscaling, handled by Samsung's AI Quantum Processor, takes source noise out of HD and even standard-definition sources remarkably well. You need to be careful with the upscaling settings – what works for 4K doesn't deliver the best results with SD – but with a little care, watching non-8K content on this next-gen panel doesn't feel like a compromise.

The 75Q900R I tested was using Samsung's latest firmware build – one designed to tackle issues revealed during my previous 85Q900R review. And, happily, this does deliver a much more immersive, consistent picture.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. Actually 8K (7,680 x 4,320) resolution **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HDR10+; HLG **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD; satellite HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI 2.0 inputs; optical digital audio output; Ethernet port; RF input; 3 x USBs **SOUND (CLAIMED):** N/A **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 4,000 nits **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,677.2(w) x 964.6(h) x 34.6(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 40.7kg

FEATURES: 8K AI upscaling processing; full array backlight with 480 zones of local dimming; Ambient Mode; external connections box; Eden smart platform with voice control; USB multimedia playback; Ultra Black Elite panel; Q Viewing Angle

PARTNER WITH



2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY:

The groundbreaking 1968 sci-fi scrubs up superbly on Warner's 4K Blu-ray, benefitting from a nuanced HDR/wide colour grade and an 8K restoration. A pair of DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes are on offer, too.

For starters, during the resplendent 4K Blu-ray of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, there's less backlight blooming when ships appear against the blackness of space. The intensity of the spacecraft does seem slightly reduced (I measured 2,980 nits on a 10 per cent white window

rather than Samsung's claimed 4,000 nits, and this drops to 1,950 nits in Movie mode). However, this seems a prudent compromise, and the picture still looks spectacularly dynamic and bright.

The blacks of space appear deliciously deep for an LCD LED TV. Again, maybe not quite as impressive as they looked on the old firmware, but there's a positive side to this, in that subtle shading and tiny star detailing felt more noticeable.

I dug out *The LEGO Movie* (4K Blu-ray) once more to sample the TV's colour handling. As with the 85in model, colours are explosively bright and intense, hitting volumes that are currently beyond the scope of rivals. But it's not just about extremes; having so much colour range and brightness to play with also helps the 75Q900R deliver additional subtleties in *2001...*'s gorgeously enriched 4K Blu-ray colour palette.

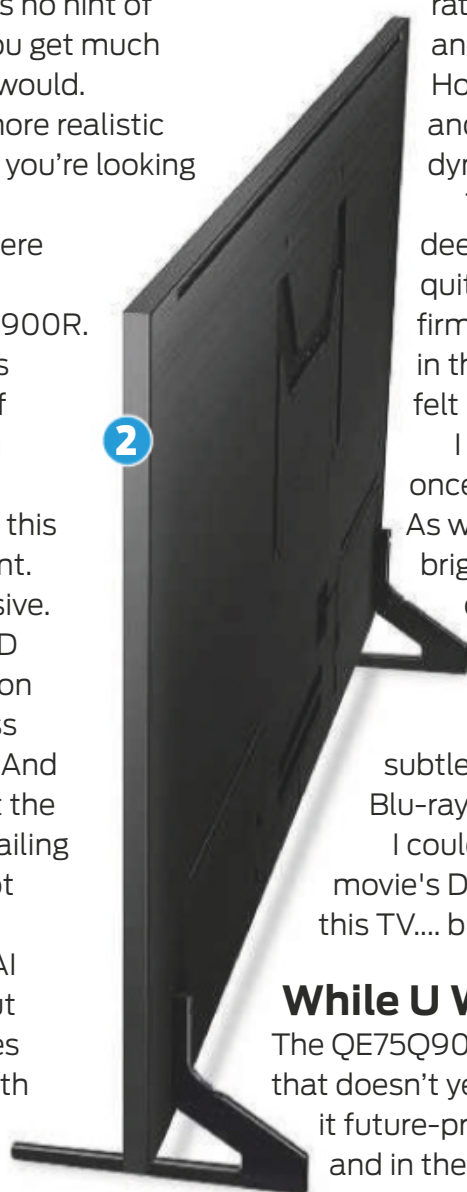
I couldn't help wonder how the Stanley Kubrick movie's Dolby Vision transfer might have looked on this TV.... but at least the HDR10 image is terrific.

While U Wait

The QE75Q900R is arguably a solution to a problem that doesn't yet exist. However, if you can afford one, it future-proofs you for when 8K content is a thing, and in the meantime delivers spectacular images ■

1. Samsung's full array LED backlight uses 480-zone dimming

2. The TV will wall-mount using a 400 x 400 VESA bracket



HCC VERDICT



Samsung QE75Q900R

→ £7,500 → www.samsung.com/uk

WE SAY: In addition to being ready for 8K when it eventually arrives, the QE75Q900R presents 4K content with sharpness, dynamism and lush colour. An eye-opening TV.

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Amazon Echo Input

Speaker-free Alexa is the simplest way to smarten up your AV system, says **Steve May**

AMAZON'S ECHO DOT is a handy way to add AI to a dumb home cinema system. There is only one slight problem. It comes with a diddy speaker that you really don't need.

Enter the Echo Input, a gloriously compact coin of a gadget, just 12.5mm tall and 80mm in diameter, which contains all you need to communicate with Amazon's Alexa assistant up in the cloud. There's no speaker here at all, just a quartet of far-field microphones and a 3.5mm stereo jack output.

The Echo Input can be used with any active speaker or sound system that has a compatible aux input. If your partnering hardware doesn't have one, but is wireless, you can also pair the device over Bluetooth.

For me, the most obvious application is to use the Echo Input as just another source for an AV receiver, albeit one that can control your smart home kit, manage your to-do-list, tell jokes and wish you goodnight.

HOME CINEMA
Choice
RECOMMENDED



The Input is nicely finished and available either in stealth black or trendy white. Setup is no different to any other Echo product. Within a few minutes, with the help of the Amazon Echo app, you'll have it connected to your Wi-Fi network.

This diddy Alexa gizmo does look a tad expensive when compared to the slightly more versatile third-gen Google Chromecast,

Four internal mics pick up voice commands

but there has to be some cost attached to the tooling and sheer ingenuity that's made this possible, so I'm not going to quibble. £35 for such a versatile source component strikes me as a bit of a bargain.

Audio performance is ultimately governed by your connected system.

For this audition, my Input was feeding a rather expensive amplifier and speaker combo, and to be honest it sounded perfectly fine when mooching around Amazon Music and Spotify.

Overall, this is an Alexa upgrade anyone can accommodate. Plumb one in today ■

HCC VERDICT



Amazon Echo Input

→ £35 → www.amazon.co.uk

WWW.SONY.CO.UK/£330

Sony WH-1000XM3

Steve May enjoys the masterful noise-cancelling and comfort of Sony's wireless flagship cans

ROGER TAYLOR MIGHT famously have been in love with his car, but I fear I'm falling in love with these noise-cancelling headphones. The third iteration of Sony's WH-1000X overear wireless design, they feature a slightly revised headband, which more snugly clasps the noggin, plus a dedicated QN1 noise-cancelling processor said to offer four times the potency of its predecessor.

As we've seen on previous generations, you can mute noise-cancelling simply by cupping a housing. This works well enough, although who wears headphones when someone is talking to them?

HOME CINEMA
Choice
BEST BUY



The cans also connect via 3.5mm

More useful is an Ambient Sound mode, which lets extraneous noise in – helpful if you want to listen out for announcements while travelling. The right earpad is touch-sensitive and can be used to control volume, skip tracks or pause playback.

All this trickery would be worth nought if the WH-1000XM3s weren't comfortable. Thankfully, the band and earcups are beautifully soft.

Feature niceties include DSEE HX audio processing to combat compressed sources, and compatibility with LDAC source players, allowing for

higher-bitrate (990kbps) transmission. They also come with a carry case, travel adapter, headphone cable and USB-C cable. Fully charged, they'll play for around 30 hours.

Hi-res capable and full-range, the cans deliver excellent spatial imaging, and create a wide soundstage that extends beyond the confines of their 40mm Liquid Crystal Polymer drivers. Bass is prominent but not exaggerated, and the midrange velvety smooth. Their breathless realism makes time-travel romance *Outlander* (Amazon Prime Video) seem all the more intimate.

Whether you're commuting, or simply pairing up with a Bluetooth source for a late-night TV binge, these noise-cancelling cans are nothing less than sublime ■

HCC VERDICT



Sony WH-1000XM3

→ £330 → www.sony.co.uk

Blue Funday

Looking to add some serious network audio smarts to your AV system? Bluesound's Node 2i streamer has what you need, reckons **Ed Selley**

As well as a headphone jack, the Node 2i streams to Bluetooth cans



SPECIFICATIONS

CONNECTIONS: 3.5mm input; stereo phono analogue output; coaxial audio output; optical audio input/output; USB; 3.5mm headphone jack; subwoofer output; 12V trigger; Ethernet **SUPPORTED AUDIO FORMATS:** FLAC, MQA, WAV and AIFF (hi-res); MP3, AAC, WMA, OGG, OPUS and ALAC **SUPPORTED SERVICES:** Spotify, Amazon Music, TIDAL, Deezer, Qobuz, JUKE, Napster, Tunes and more **DIMENSIONS:** 220(w) x 46(h) x 146(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 1.12kg

FEATURES: AirPlay 2, aptX HD Bluetooth (two-way); dual-band Wi-Fi; BluOS app

of get-up-and-go that leaves you involved in the music rather than just listening to it. A very likeable trait of the Node 2i is that it never comes across as hard or overtly 'digital' in its presentation either. Vocals, in particular, sound rich, weighty and possessed of believable scale and nuance.

And the joy of a 'net-connected streamer is that you don't need to own the music you are listening to either. Anxious to see why Twitter had suddenly exploded, I selected the new Weezer covers album, available as a Tidal Master. Whether the world is ready for this American rock band to cover girl group anthem *No Scrubs* (and it probably isn't), it is hard to argue with the quality of the performance from the Node 2i – it also proved been entirely stable used via Wi-Fi.

The presence of AirPlay 2 and a digital optical audio input also means this preamp can do a fine job hijacking other physical systems (taking a feed from a TV, perhaps), or using an Apple iPhone or iPad as a source. AirPlay 2 in particular is impressive, as it allows you to form an ad hoc multiroom network with any other compatible gizmo, and introduces Siri voice control talents in addition to Amazon Alexa.

It all adds up

This level of functionality, the excellent BluOS interface and the Bluesound's superb sound quality all add up to make the Node 2i a bit of a bargain. If your AV system doesn't have network audio capabilities (or the ones it does have aren't very advanced), this is a one-stop shop to bring it up to speed. And then you can start thinking of adding Pulse speakers for hi-res multiroom adventures... ■

THE FIRST GENERATION of Bluesound audio components won many friends when it launched in 2014, thanks to excellent performance, smart design and the brilliance of the BluOS smartphone/tablet control app. The basic product range remains the same five years on, only we're now into a third generation – albeit one with the same physical design as its predecessor, hence the addition of an 'i' to model names/numbers rather than a '3'.

The Node 2i tested here is a line-level and preamp device that can output to a stereo amplifier, AV receiver or powered speaker set. An onboard headphone amp caters to personal audio junkies; a version with a 2 x 60W amplifier (the Pownode 2i) is also available, in addition to the 2TB HDD-toting Vault 2i, and the Pulse family of soundbar, subwoofer and standalone speakers.

The Node 2i features a Burr Brown DAC that allows it to decode material up to 24-bit/192kHz, either fed in via digital connection or wirelessly. Supported formats cover everything you are likely to encounter (FLAC, ALAC, MQA, WAV, AIFF, MP3...)

– with the possible exception of DSD.

Joining this DAC is support for a wide selection of streaming services, including the usual suspects of Tidal (including Tidal Masters), Qobuz (including Sublime+) Spotify and Deezer, plus 'net radio. Only Apple Music remains an obvious hold out.

The Node 2i then supports aptX HD Bluetooth streaming and AirPlay 2 for even more flexibility. You can also control multiple Bluesound devices in a multiroom setup (streaming from the Node 2i to Pulse speakers for instance) from the same app – and this includes BluOS-compatible devices from sister brand NAD, such as the M17 V2 processor [see HCC #293].

BluOS has evolved into a very lovely piece of software indeed. It's available for Android and iOS devices and offers a logical, fast and well-engineered user experience that is equally happy controlling one device or several. One of the reasons it can do this is that the Node 2i is not a true UPnP product. It can use a standard NAS drive as a library, but it compiles its own database and can't be controlled by any form of third-party app.

The Node 2i itself is a compact and reasonably well-finished box that is available in either black or white. The build quality is good and the decision to fit a small selection of hard controls on the top panel is an underrated bonus, as it means you can silence it there as a means of last resort when your smartphone has gone walkies. There are some more ornate streamers available around this £500 price but the Node 2i isn't something you'd be embarrassed to have on display.

Be My Baby

Having completed the painless setup procedure and let the Node 2i complete a scan of my digital music library, I kicked off listening with a 24-bit/44.1kHz download of My Baby's *Mounaki*. The Bluesound responded well to this innately groovy piece of music. There is a decent bass extension combined with a feeling

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Hi-res-capable wireless music streamer

POSITION: Junior sibling of Bluesound's Pownode 2i

PEERS: Sonos Connect; Yamaha WX-AD10

HCC VERDICT



Bluesound Node 2i

→ £500 → www.bluesound.com

WE SAY: This hi-res streamer looks unremarkable but offers a superb sonic performance, ease of use and plenty of flexibility.

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Visit www.denon.co.uk for more information.



The soundbar time forgot

Would you trade immersive audio for kick-ass stereo? **Steve May** ponders the allure of Teufel's premium Cinebar Pro soundbar/subwoofer system

UNBOXING TEUFEL'S CINEBAR Pro is akin to discovering dinosaurs grazing in Jurassic Park. If you're hoping for sonic evolution you'll be disappointed. This throwback soundbar eschews fashionable immersive sound codecs in favour of conventional 2.1, but still has wow factor.

Like the average dino, it's huge too. Measuring over a metre wide (best not to partner it with anything less than a 55in screen, and find plenty of below bezel space to accommodate its 14.7cm height), it lumbers onto the scales at 11kg and will test the mettle of any wallmount.

And at over £1,000, it's also horribly expensive.

So best give the Cinebar Pro a wide berth? Hardly. The thing sounds great.

Rock solid

As befits its price ticket, build quality is exceptional. The soundbar cabinet has a smart hairline finish, while the non-removable grille is metallic. Behind, in a stereo configuration, are four 4in midrange drivers and

two tweeters. These have a subtle metallic red trim, just visible through the grille.

The Cinebar Pro doesn't just use a forward-facing array to create its soundstage; two additional side-firing 4in midrange drivers are positioned at the bar's ends, to add extra sonic width.

Setup is old school. If you own a mothballed SPL meter, here's your chance to give it another whirl and set levels. There's no calibration microphone supplied; instead you'll need to manually enter distances between the soundbar, subwoofer and listening position. The main 'bar also requires a distance from speaker to either side wall.

The user experience is not all primeval though. Wireless functionality extends to Bluetooth, Spotify Connect and Google Chromecast, and the soundbar itself is a fully equipped system hub, offering a quartet of HDMI inputs, plus an HDMI output with ARC. CEC control and 4K passthrough are on the spec sheet (Teufel makes no claim on HDR support, but the 'bar did successfully pass an HDR10 signal). Audio-wise, it's compatible with base-level Dolby Digital and DTS sources, although multichannel soundtracks are down-mixed to 2.1.

Additional connectivity includes coaxial and optical digital audio (helpful if your pre-diluvian telly does not offer HDMI with ARC); two 3.5mm inputs; and a wired subwoofer



AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Premium 2.1-channel soundbar system

POSITION:

Top-tier, alongside the 3.1-channel Cinebar Trios

PEERS:

Yamaha YSP-5600; Bluesound Pulse 2i soundbar/sub

output (which you won't need). There's also a 3.5mm headphone jack; the soundbar does not support Bluetooth headphones. There's no dedicated USB media player.

Basic cable management comes in the form of a trio of red rubber bands on the rear, designed to stop cables drooping. A rear-side cavity gives HDMI inputs/output plenty of space.

Two Wi-Fi aerials can be raised devil horn-style when required. It's worth remembering these when positioning the soundbar, as the last thing you want is for this plastic pair to block your screen view. Personally I'd rather use wired Ethernet to get connected, but surprisingly there's no hardwire option here. It's Wi-Fi or bust.

The second part of Teufel's premium system is the accompanying T 10 subwoofer. This is a similarly large, ported beast, with a 10in driver and claimed 150W power plant. It connects wirelessly to the soundbar.

No dumb boom box, the T10 offers plenty of control. Crossover is variable between 100Hz, 120Hz and 150Hz, and there's 180-degree phase shift adjustment, a bass-boost level control and helpful clipping warning.

Interestingly, the subwoofer's driver can be orientated either downward or forward-facing. The former is a good option when you have a hardwood floor and need it to be positioned relatively close to a wall (perhaps alongside your TV). The resulting bass ripple is generally uniform. Opt for forward-facing when you have a larger space, and can sit the sub away from a wall. The sub's supporting feet can be arranged accordingly.

The soundbar's onscreen display is a simple overlaid text box. A settings menu allows you to determine HDMI

'The soundbar presents beautifully, locking dialogue dead-centre. High-frequency details are crystal-clear'

passthrough, lip sync delay (variable between 0 and 250ms), display fade-out time and TV source selection.

Teufel's supplied remote has buttons for four sound presets, dubbed Movie, Voice, Music and Night. The latter noticeably strips back the bass output and is best avoided.

Getting the basics right

While there's nothing particularly pretty about the Cinebar Pro, it doesn't disappoint where it counts: sound quality. Teufel has opted to fine-tune the basics, rather than defy the laws of physics or dabble (much) in psychoacoustics.

The result is enormous dynamic wallop, with an engaging mid-range that suits everything from *The Chase* to *Baby Driver*. The soundbar presents beautifully, locking dialogue dead-centre. High-frequency details are crystal-clear, never sounding pitchy or acerbic.

The integration between subwoofer and soundbar is also impressive. There's no doubting the former's slam

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 1in tweeters; 6 x 4in midrange drivers **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 200W **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 1 x HDMI ARC output; coaxial and optical digital audio inputs; 2 x 3.5mm inputs; 3.5mm headphone jack; subwoofer output **DOLBY ATMOS/DTS:X:** No/No **SEPARATE SUB:** Yes. 10in driver (forward- or down-firing depending on orientation); 150W amp **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS (OFF FEET):** 1,200(w) x 135(h) x 140(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 11.2kg

FEATURES: Dolby and DTS decoding; Dynamore processing modes; side-firing drivers; wall-mounting; Bluetooth; Google Chromecast; Spotify Connect; wireless subwoofer connection; 4K passthrough over HDMI

PARTNER WITH



TEUFEL EFFEKT: This active stereo speaker pairing (each with separate midrange and tweeter units) delivers a wireless upgrade to a 4.1 experience. The usual retail price is £360, but a bundle with the Cinebar Pro gives a £60 saving.



and weight, which is just what you need to enliven onscreen action.

However, you'll want to

tailor the bass output (both via placement

and level adjustment on the remote) to best suit your listening room. When first set up, mine had a habit of suddenly booming with the most innocuous of material.

During the unscheduled intrusion in comedy thriller *Game Night* (Blu-ray), Teufel's Cinebar Pro effortlessly scales up from social chit-chat to full-blown bedlam. Flying bottles shatter brightly across the front soundstage, while the driving electro score pumps low below like a racing heart. When a head collides with a frying pan, there's a satisfying weight to the centrally placed 'bong.'

The soundbar's side-facing drivers kick into action when Teufel's Dynamore surround feature is selected. This processing mode creates an impressive, wide spatial sound, and provides options for Wide or the more exaggerated Ultra. I found Wide the most consistently entertaining. It enhances the stereo presentation without losing solidity, and offers a sense of epic size that works really well with soaring orchestras and Starfleet fly-bys alike.

Titanic Teufel

Yes, the Cinebar Pro hails from a home theatre time forgot. It doesn't acknowledge next-generation audio codecs and makes no attempt at modern, lifestyle design. It's also expensive, at least when compared to more sophisticated high-end offerings from the likes of Sony and Samsung. But it's a titanic soundbar all the same.

Remember: dinosaurs once ruled the Earth. Perhaps they were made by Teufel? ■

1. Twin midrange drivers and a tweeter are provided for the L/R channels

2. Teufel's full-size soundbar gets a full-size remote

3. The sub can be flipped on switchable feet to fire forwards

HCC VERDICT



Teufel Cinebar Pro

→ £1,100 → www.teufelaudio.com/uk

WE SAY: This heavyweight soundbar revisits old-school values to offer a superior 2.1 listening experience. Not a bargain, but certainly a banger.

Accessorize me!

Bluetooth speakers

On the hunt for a speaker that delivers audio enjoyment wherever you happen to be at the time?

Ed Selley gets carried away with four likely candidates

BLUETOOTH IS NOW firmly established as a key part of how we consume media. The wireless technology has gone from a somewhat flaky means of sending a heavily compressed signal a short distance to something that delivers lossless audio, often to more than one device at a time with absolute stability. As companies slowly eradicate the 3.5mm socket from mobile devices – buy a premium smartphone and you'll often find that useful jack has gone missing – Bluetooth is fast becoming the only game in town to get sound off our portable hardware.

This means that if you are looking for a means of boosting the sound of a kitchen,

office or bedroom, a Bluetooth-capable speaker is an obvious purchase. And from here it's a very small leap to the idea of buying one with an onboard battery so that when the weather eventually perks up, you can take it out and about with you.

'Numerous Bluetooth speakers are available, from palm-sized squawkers to premium largescale models'

Pop into an AV retailer and you'll find numerous such models available, ranging from palm-sized budget squawkers to largescale models with premium tickets. For this roundup, we've settled around the £300 mark, where you'd expect design, specification and sonic performance to dovetail nicely.

Our four models, from Bang & Olufsen, DALI, JBL and Libratone, have all been asked to perform some typical portable speaker work, including a spin of *X-Men: Days of Future Past* via Netflix, and then getting stuck into streamed music via Tidal. But which of this portable foursome will stand out as the wireless wizard of choice?

WWW.BANG-OLUFSEN.COM/£350

Bang and Olufsen Beoplay P6

Cute and compact, with app support and beefy bass

B&O'S BEOPLAY P6 is one of the smaller Bluetooth speakers from the brand and the smallest model in this test, standing just 17cm high and 13cm wide. Its Bluetooth specification doesn't stretch to aptX support, but you do get a smart device app that allows you to tweak the speaker's EQ by moving an onscreen cursor. There's also a configurable button on the speaker's top that can be used for instigating voice assistants or simply repeating your favourite track. Amp power is rated at 36W for the woofer and 30W for the unit's full-range driver; battery life is rated 16 hours.

The P6 feels by far the best built speaker here and the industrial-tinged design is excellent. Little touches like the use of a micro USB-C plug for charging and the leather carry strap are welcome. This is an expensive speaker, but you can see where your money has gone.

For a small model, the Beoplay P6 has a more than respectable bass response and this

lends the initial Sentinel attack in *X-Men: Days of Future Past* a level of force and scale that helps the performance along. The speaker also does a commendable job of capturing some of the echo effect from the scene's concrete walls, and unpicking the frenetic mix. Some of the dialogue isn't as clear as it could be, however, and if you push the levels too much, the P6's top-end becomes a little hard. At least B&O's EQ system is on hand for you to hunt for a better balance.

With *Everybody Wants to Rule the World* from Weezer's *Teal* album, the Beoplay 6 is a great deal of fun. It skips along with an excellent sense of drive and timing and while the treble isn't as well defined as some of the other models here, it is rich and well integrated with the rest of the frequency range, which again showcases a dab hand at bass. There is also a reasonable sense of soundstage and image too, making for an all-round enjoyable listen.



HCC VERDICT



Bang & Olufsen Beoplay P6

→ £350 → www.bang-olufsen.com

DALI Katch

If there's a catch to this smart-looking portable, we're struggling to find it

DALI'S KATCH MAY now be approaching three years on shop shelves but it's aptX-capable and uses Bluetooth 4.0 as a base standard. A twin 25W amp unit powers a stereo driver array augmented by passive radiators to improve bass response; two EQ settings tweak sound depending on placement.

The Katch has a 3.5mm input for non-Bluetooth devices, and next to this a powered USB, making attaching a Chromecast Audio a simple business. Battery life is claimed at 24 hours, with recharging via a dedicated power supply.

The chassis design is superb, with pleasing curves, a slender body and a useful grab strap on the end. A variety of colours are available, including the 'Green Moss' pictured here. It should blend well in a variety of spaces.

The speaker finds a level of space and scale in the *X-Men...* Sentinel attack that



belies its relatively small and slimline enclosure. The impact of punches borders on being felt as well as heard, and the Katch manages to do this while simultaneously finding midrange and treble details that can elude some other speakers here. And despite the single chassis, the Katch is able to deliver

There are five finishes available

a performance that feels a little cinematic. There is a surprising amount of headroom too.

With music, the Katch is comfortably the best of this quartet; the same qualities of decent bass extension and excellent integration with the upper registers are in evidence. More than this though, the speaker sounds consistently engaging. It delivers basslines with a feeling of speed and energy that has you nodding your head and getting stuck in. Overall it's tremendously entertaining, and backed up by a very smart design.

HCC VERDICT ★★★★★

DALI Katch

→ £330 → www.dali-speakers.com

UK.JBL.COM/£280

JBL Xtreme 2

This speaker serves up a big, wide, forceful sound – and you can take it swimming too...

IF YOU ARE an all-action, outdoorsy type, JBL's Xtreme 2 has a few things going for it, notably the best waterproof rating (IPX7) in this roundup (it can work while floating in water) and a hefty shoulder strap to make carrying it around a doddle. True, its rugged ambitions mean it's not exactly a style icon – even a 'camouflage' finish option isn't stealthy – but it does feel well made.

Active drivers are two 0.75in tweeters, and two 2.75in midbass forming the end caps of the chassis, with 2 x 20W of onboard oomph. The Bluetooth spec is v4.2 but there is no aptX provision. Battery life is quoted

at up to 15 hours, and there's a USB socket for charging your 'phone. Multiples of the Xtreme 2 (and other JBL speakers) can be linked together via Connect+ technology.

Those with a significant space to fill will appreciate this JBL. It has a bass extension and sheer impact that dwarfs its roundup challengers. There's a force and scale to the *X-Men* attack sequence that's deeply

appealing, and the counter-firing driver arrangement ensures a wide and spacious image at the same time. The top-end of the Xtreme 2 lacks a little clarity, however, and this means dialogue can be trickier to follow and some fine detail is harder to place. But it does manage to avoid sounding harsh or aggressive.

The biggest issue is that the speaker's thumping low-end can sound leaden and sluggish, particularly with music. This is a shame, because the Xtreme 2 delivers vocals well, and produces a wide and believable stereo image, giving your favourite musicians the space to perform.

A little more speed and rhythm would turn this well-priced model into a star.



A rubber/fabric finish is built to last

HCC VERDICT ★★★★★

JBL Xtreme 2

→ £280 → uk.jbl.com

Libratone ZIPP 2

Functionality is sky-high in this second-generation cylindrical speaker

LIBRATONE'S ZIPP 2 takes the portable Bluetooth speaker concept and adds plenty to it while remaining south of the £300 mark. As well as taking a Bluetooth (sadly not aptX) signal, it can also be parked on a wireless network for DLNA audio streaming; can be used with Apple AirPlay 2 and Spotify Connect; has Amazon Alexa built-in; offers 'net radio via Libratone's smart device app; and packs auto Room EQ. There's a lot going on – even a 3.5mm input.

Internally, the speaker has a 4in woofer and 1in tweeter, bolstered by dual passive bass

The ZIPP 2 stands 26cm high



radiators. Libratone doesn't provide a power rating, but the ZIPP 2 doesn't seem to be short on grunt. Perhaps as a result of all the extra functionality, the battery life is just 12 hours, but this should still be enough for most users.

Aesthetically, the ZIPP 2 lacks the elegance of the B&O and DALI models, but it's not ugly either. Red and black are among alternative grille finishes.

With my *X-Men* demo scene, the ZIPP 2 thunders ahead with commendable purpose and volume. Bassy thuds are extremely convincing, and this is mated

to a midrange that finds good amounts of detail, while being tonally believable at the same time. But a limitation is that the ZIPP 2 delivers its performance with a lack of width. More than simply being a mono speaker, it fails to open up its soundstage to feel cinematic and this can serve to take you out of the moment.

Musically, this narrow presentation is still apparent but it doesn't stop the ZIPP 2 sounding big, confident and lively. It's great with voices and instruments, and its deep bass extension doesn't come at the cost of sounding slow or languid. There could be a fraction more resolution and nuance compared to the best in the test, but this is still a good listen.

HCC VERDICT



Libratone ZIPP 2

→ £280 → www.libratone.com/uk

Final standings

ALL THE SPEAKERS in this quartet have something to offer, showing the strength and variety of the portable market. Your buying choice may boil down to something as basic as size, styling, bonus physical input or battery life, but audio performance still counts...

JBL's Xtreme 2 has excellent portability, a construction that inspires out-and-about confidence, and no trouble filling significant spaces with a bold and confident sound. It does, however, feel a little slow with music, and the styling is deliberately 'rugged'.

Bang & Olufsen's Beoplay P6, by contrast, is a lovely slice of industrial design and it sounds larger than its compact chassis might suggest. App support and USB charging are welcome bonus features. But it is expensive – and other speakers here do more for less.

Such as Libratone's ZIPP 2. No other model in our roundup comes close to this specification, and if you need wireless functionality, voice control and

other niceties, it's the obvious choice. It also sound well-balanced and dynamic. The absence of aptX Bluetooth and its narrow soundstaging do count against it, but it remains an excellent product at a competitive price.

This leaves DALI's Katch taking top honours. Judged on audio performance alone, this speaker combines impact, speed and drive to outshine the competition. Throw in a smattering of useful features and an excellent design and you have a worthy winner ■

DALI's Katch mixes slick styling with excellent sonics





SIM2 NERO 4S

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Digital Copy

We've spent years embracing the darkness with our home cinema TVs, but is it time we saw the light? **Mark Craven** would like to do both – he just needs technology to catch up

PITCH BLACK. NOT the Vin Diesel movie (although that's actually quite good), but the idea itself. Total darkness. An absence of light.

Pitch black is one of the attractions of OLED technology. You'll also see it touted as true black and perfect black. If Spinal Tap hadn't got there first, I'm certain an OLED brand would have flagged it as 'None More Black' by now.

The ability of a home cinema display to deliver blackness is obviously desirable, not only for fans of sci-fi films set deep in space. **A genuine black level response translates to a strong contrast**, and a backdrop for colours to shine.

And OLED certainly has the upper hand in this regard, its self-emissive pixel technology enabling a black level that even the best LCD panel can't compete with. Put the two technologies side by side in a darkened room, displaying a black screen, and you'll be able to spot the difference.

However, hindering OLED's drive to greatness are two factors.

Firstly, watching images in a darkened room isn't for everyone. As I've written in this column before, blackout viewing conditions are a by-product of cinema's early history, when projectors had all the luminance of a flickering candle.

Now, I'm not pooh-poohing the idea of aiming for total darkness on movie night. For some it's as much a part of the cinema experience as the natural judder of 24fps delivery. But these days there's no desperate need to completely dim the lights, bringing eye-strain and spilled drinks into play. And the introduction of extra light sources in your viewing room gives LCD technology a black-level leg up.

And then we get to HDR. Here, OLED, with its sub-1,000 peak nit levels, is falling behind LCD

in the brightness war. And brightness is becoming more important.

Interlinked. Interlinked. Interlinked

It's hard to say – even after three years – what subjectively makes for a class-leading HDR experience, because your eyes are drawn to so much else when watching a movie, from framing choices to sharpness to motion to colour palette. One of my favourite 4K BD experiences has been *Blade Runner 2049*, despite its HDR grade being relatively subtle.

However, pop in a title like *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which appears to have been mastered by someone wearing an industrial-grade visor, and if your display has the brightness prowess, you can almost feel the heat from those flamethrowers. It's extreme, but I like it. Very much.

Having witnessed various 4K TVs over the past few years, I'm certain that models that can hit luminance peaks of 2,000 nits and above are what really should be our HDR future. The Holy Grail, obviously, is one that can also achieve a pitch black base level without batting an eyelid.

Currently neither OLED nor LCD have that best of both worlds ability, and probably never will. So attention turns to microscopic/ultra-fine LED displays – MicroLED – which replace backlighting with self-emissive pixels (à la OLED) but retain huge brightness capabilities. In the long run, this appears to be where the premium TV market is heading, and hopefully the mid-range market too, if the LEDs can be made small enough to enable consumer-friendly panel sizes. Samsung has suggested a 75in MicroLED TV will be ready for retail by 2020. I'll watch *Pitch Black* while I wait... ■

*What's been your favourite HDR experience?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

By 'industrial-grade visor', **Mark Craven** means one of those masks worn by Homer in the opening credits of *The Simpsons*





The Hi-Fi Guy

When it comes to the hi-fi vs home cinema debate, **David Vivian** reckons there's no need to pick and choose – even though he once threw away a 5.1 home cinema amplifier

A FEW DECADES ago, there was a perception that anyone claiming to have a boundless enthusiasm for home cinema and an undying devotion to stereo audiophilia was lying, tragically confused or receiving treatment for schizophrenia. It wasn't just that the two tribes didn't play well together, the script suggested the rift between them was antagonistic and self-righteous. To home cinema buffs, hi-fi nerds were obsessed with needle fluff. **To hi-fi nerds, all home cinema buffs cared about was the size of their subwoofers.** It was like Einstein's description of the full-scale universe and quantum mechanics – there just didn't seem any way the two 'versions of reality' could be unified.

But it was all nonsense (except the Einstein bit). Flying in the face of the notional kit-obsessed stereotypes were people who simply loved film and music in equal measure and believed enjoyment of the content was what mattered most, whether plain audio, music incorporated in a film soundtrack or, indeed, video of a concert in glorious surround sound. And, naturally, some of those people had enough space and money to live the dream. In the lounge, a purist stereo system – ideally one with an impossibly temperamental turntable, fragile valve amplification and a vintage open-reel tape deck. In another room – but preferably a separate building at the bottom of the garden where kilowatts, decibels and 8Hz shockwaves could have their day – a projector-equipped home cinema setup, maybe custom install but probably free-standing, allowing for expensive, on-the-hoof upgrades.

Yep, for those with the funds and inclination to get it all sorted there was no need to choose or compromise. Which wasn't to say that the rest of us didn't do our best to seamlessly combine

stereo and AV with what we could afford or had at our disposal.

The bad old days

Years ago I shared a modestly-sized flat with a ridiculously large CRT Philips telly and Marantz DVD player simply crying out for a little multichannel action. As a fledgling hi-fi writer, borrowing the required extra speakers and sub wasn't a problem, and at the time I just happened to have a collection of high-quality power amps knocking around which I put to good use. They stood in for the relatively feeble onboard muscle offered by the budget 5.1 Aiwa setup I'd purchased to facilitate my future viewing/listening pleasure.

As my upstairs/downstairs neighbours could attest to (and often did) it made a hell of a racket. When I would play the firework finale from *Meet Joe Black* flat out (as I often did to demonstrate the benefits of having monoblock power amps do the heavy lifting for the left, right and centre channels) they must have thought an alien invasion was in progress over the centre of Maidstone. Was it fun? Absolutely. Did my listening to music in stereo suffer? Without a lot of re-configuring and faffing about, yes. (The Aiwa's surround options for music didn't convince). Was it worth the effort? For a while, just about. In the long run, no. Eventually, I reverted to a simpler stereo hi-fi with my TV and DVD player plumbed in as sources.

But that was then. This is now. Yes, nothing beats a dedicated home cinema room (or even building) with a projector and screen, but the emergence of convergence tech for convenience has transformed the desirability of the system that does it all with true hi-fi credibility. More on that next time ■

*Is your home cinema system also your hi-fi setup?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

David Vivian's passions are movies, music and cars – he likes to combine them by watching *The Blues Brothers* once a fortnight



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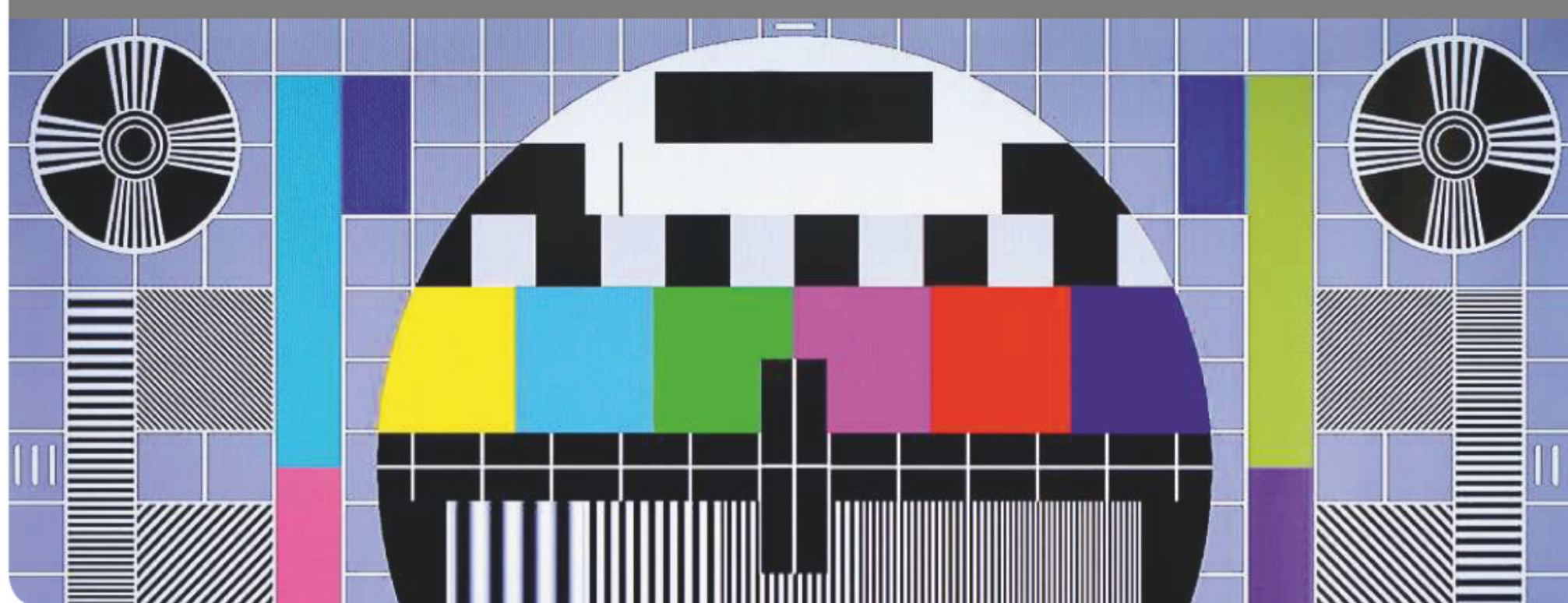
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In The Mix

Jon Thompson is pleased to discover a new 4K HDR test disc is on the horizon, and suggests everyone should consider paying their AV setup some care and attention

CES HAS BEEN and gone and the thing that most excited me was not a state-of-the-art display technology or the tentative appearance of HDMI 2.1 (if this drags on long enough HDMI 3.0 will be coming over the horizon). Rather, it was a disc.

In Las Vegas, Stacey Spears showed a work in progress of his UHD 4K HDR evaluation platter. You may remember such discs – when Blu-ray came out we were falling over test discs to help set up and calibrate a display. But so far the only disc on the market to do the same for 4K and HDR is produced by Ryan P. Masciola's Diversified Video Solutions [DVS]. Others have been done as tests but are not commercially available. The DVS title has recently been updated to Version 2 with some great new patterns that really test a TV.

You may ask why you need to calibrate your display. The simple fact is it comes from the factory with mediocre settings, and it's an analogue tech, taking digital data and displaying it by converting it to an analogue voltage. This means it can suffer 'drift', and regular calibration is a good thing to do. Would you eat badly cooked food? No, so why would you want to watch a badly displayed image?

Using something like the DVS setup/test disc needn't scare you either.

For example, setting the black/white points (meaning you can see into shadows correctly and highlights don't look muted or flat) is simple. The test flashes the value you should be able to see on your screen – adjust the relevant control until you can.

What is of greater interest on Masciola's setup disc is the HDR test material. As I've said before, on most TVs you don't have any real control to change HDR delivery, but you can check if your TV is tone mapping or converting the image's true dynamic range on the disc to a level your TV can display. Most

consumer displays are still only somewhere between 400 and 1,000 nits – way less than the brightness of the level most discs are mastered using (4,000 nits) and nowhere near the 10,000 nits that's the max level the HDR spec defines. The tone mapping is going to be working very hard, so it needs to be right.

LG has collaborated with Stacey Spears on his new evaluation disc, so I'd hope all its displays will reproduce the test images without flaw, and you can buy an LG TV knowing at least it handles HDR10 and Dolby Vision correctly. I also expect a bun fight when the disc comes out with other manufacturers trying to explain why their panels don't reproduce the test images as well, and thus are not accurately showing HDR content. Knowing Spears is an obsessive for detail, his disc will no doubt be spot on.

A lot now seems to be happening on the test pattern and evaluation front. Another project that Diversified Video Solutions has been involved with is working with the people at Murideo, which makes industry standard calibration test and analysis devices for home cinema setup, the Six G and Six A. It has now launched a new product, called 'Seven', with a whole host of Dolby Vision setup and test patterns created by DVS. Now, unless you really need to check your system on a daily basis you won't be buying one of these, but it's still useful to know what equipment is used in the professional setup world.

Calibration is an art and a science. You shouldn't just plug it all in and expect the best. Nor should you always feel the need to buy the latest hardware for a better picture and sound experience. Instead, tune-up your existing system and you will be shocked, amazed and surprised by actually how good it really is ■

Have you had your display or speaker system calibrated? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

When he's not in his screening room, **Jon Thompson** tweets about Hollywood gossip, movie-making and digital mastering at [@johnnyfocal](https://twitter.com/johnnyfocal)



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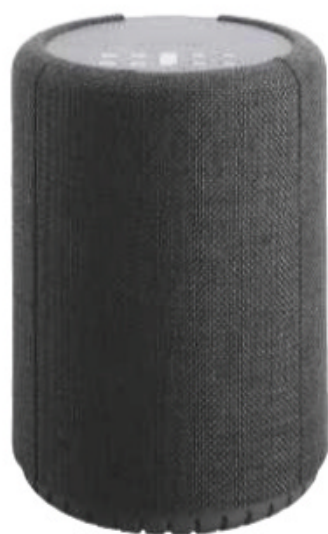
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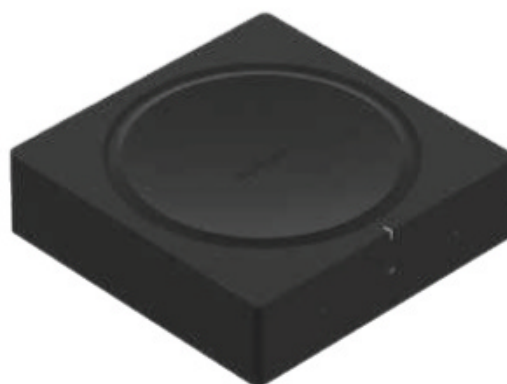
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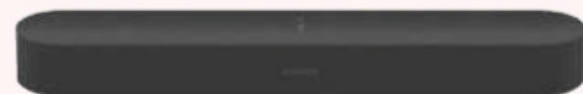


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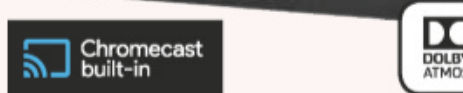
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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current tech? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **Team HCC** is here to help

Disc double-take

I read Mark Craven's *Digital Copy* column, as always, but with regard to the BBFC certification on *The Equalizer 2* disc [see HCC #295] I believe you may have glanced rather than looked at the discs in the package.

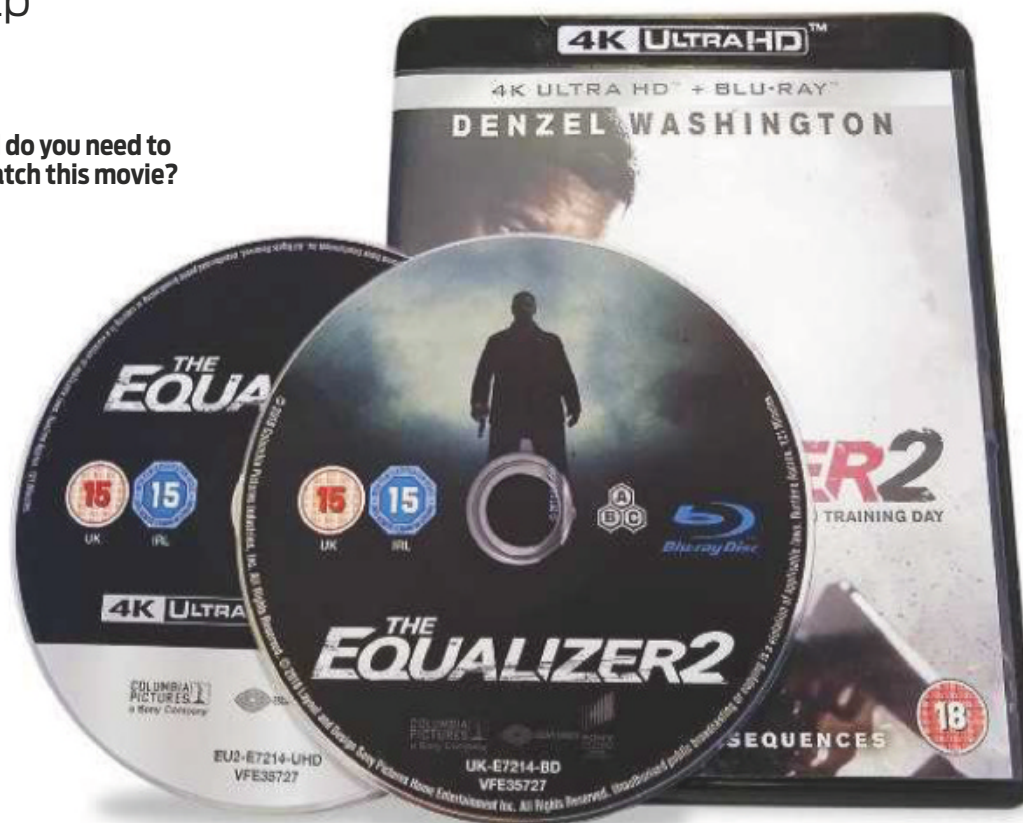
After reading your moan I looked at my copy – that I have not yet watched although I saw it at the cinema – and the HD Blu-ray states UK 15 and IRL 15, while the Ultra HD 4K copy states UK 18 and IRL 15. Maybe recheck your copy, although I bet you are correct and possibly received a mis-stamped version, so keep it for future value!

Regarding the rest of your column, I bought my LG OLED TV for 4K and Dolby Vision, also my LG Blu-ray player for the same reason. I may change my player for a Panasonic model one day to have HDR10+.

Adrian

Mark Craven replies: Well, Adrian, I've had another look and (as the picture shows) my 4K UHD copy of *The Equalizer 2* is certainly labelled 15 for both the 1080p and 4K discs, while the sleeve art brandishes an 18 certificate. As you say, this is undoubtedly an error which was quickly rectified, although

How old do you need to be to watch this movie?



I'm aware of other buyers whose versions are the same, including Twitter user @DarrenDilliway, who says the BBFC told him they would be 'looking into this with the distributor.' Perhaps Sony Pictures has been put on the naughty step.

Smart solutions needed

Regarding Barrie's dilemma [Feedback,

Roll-up roll-down TV, HCC #294] and the 65in OLED blocking his view of the Lake District hills, perhaps HCC could run a feature on solutions, for example the products by Future Automation?

On a separate note, has the *The Kenny Everett Video Show* ever been released on DVD? This was shown at 7pm on ITV on Mondays. I did have these on video tape,

Still waiting for Annihilation

Just a quick enquiry – some time ago Jon Thompson said that *Annihilation* was due a massive Blu-ray release. So far it has not appeared in the shops. Is it going to be available at all? If not, is there any way I can get it? I could watch it on Netflix, but would prefer a hard copy!

John Ellison

Mark Craven replies: Although this Alex Garland sci-fi went direct to Netflix in the UK and other regions, studio Paramount actually released it on UHD Blu-ray and 1080p Blu-ray last Summer in the US. And it's now scheduled for an April 1 release here in the UK – we'll be reviewing it in an upcoming issue. Hold off streaming it on Netflix if you can, as you'll get the benefits of an Atmos soundmix to go with the 4K Dolby Vision HDR images. As for the movie, if you liked Garland's *Ex Machina*, you'll love this one too...



'Open wide!'

recorded on a Grundig SVR 4004 GB. Those were the days.
Michael

Mark Craven replies: Future Automation does make some particularly smart-looking TV lifts, which can hide a display within cabinetry until its needed – a similar idea as LG's new OLED TV R, only without the bendy screen. Such a solution might help Barrie with his vista vexation, but would still leave furniture in the way of the window. A better idea might be a ceiling-based hinge mechanism, another area where Future Automation has solutions.

Other options (although not knowing Barrie's room layout these may not be viable) would be a traditional swivelling wall-mount, or even the TV-on-rails system constructed by HCC reader Patrick Peeters [see HCC #243]...

Anton van Beek replies: Funny you should ask about *The Kenny Everett Video Show* as I noticed this now being available on a DVD boxset earlier this month – I almost picked it up in Sainsbury's while doing my weekly shop.

Released by Network, it collects the four series of the show that ran from 1978 to 1981, plus three specials, across six discs. Grab it for around £50.

What 5.1 pack is right for me?

Hi Team HCC. Over the last 12 months, I have been upgrading my home cinema setup. I now have a 65in E series LG OLED TV, a Denon AVR-X2400H receiver and a Panasonic DP-UB820 Blu-ray player. I also have Sky Q and Netflix.

Speakers are next on my shopping list, and this is where I am seeking some advice. I currently have an old set of Mission FS1 satellite speakers/subwoofer in a 5.1 arrangement, which has served me well, but does seem a bit stretched now, especially when the volume goes up at movie time.

I watch TV in my lounge, and wish to keep with 5.1, which is used only for watching movies with the family, and at a later stage I would potentially add a couple of Atmos speakers. I have a large TV cabinet, so floorstanding speakers are not an option.

I was thinking of upgrading to a set of bookshelf speakers, which I would hope to be a noticeable sound upgrade, and would allow me to use the cabinet space I have available, with stands for the rears. Speaker size is a consideration – I don't want them to dominate the room.

I am keen to understand any compromise – e.g. lower-performance sub that might be relevant for lounge usage. A couple of systems I read about were the Q Acoustics 3000i range, and Monitor Audio Bronze, which seem to tick most of my requirements.

My budget is around £1,000. I can stretch that a bit if I would achieve a noticeable

★ Star Letter...

Calling time on black bars

Hi. Dare I bring up the black bars debate? Well I have! I could be outnumbered within the magazine but overall I think the general public doesn't like them.

The problem is that I have been buying 4K Blu-rays and there are some films that block you from stretching the picture. So then I use the Blu-ray instead (not blocked), which works out quite costly. We had a choice before to keep everyone happy, now we don't.

I normally use my Oppo UDP-203 player for stretching or zooming on most 4K discs with still great pictures. I know it downgrades the image but not by much – and if I have a smaller picture I think this is a downgrade. I have a Sony 49in 2017 TV, even that blocks all zoom modes but not on Blu-rays. There is no way of knowing if the 4K Blu-ray will zoom or not. So I will go back to buying Blu-ray.

Also, any news on a 4K Freesat Humax box – am due an upgrade.

I love reading the magazine. Went to the cinema the other day – picture looked like standard-def. Much better at home.
Dean

Mark Craven replies: I'll be the first to admit that I have never stretched or zoomed a 2.40:1 or other aspect ratio image to fill a 16:9 display. Black bars don't bother me at all. I'm even a fan of when otherwise televisual shows throw in a few ultra-wide-format shots for artistic flair. I seem to remember a Jamie Oliver cookery programme doing this for a while. Anyway, I digress...

Following your letter, I've now spent a good amount of time with an Oppo UDP-203 player and marvelled at its ability to stretch an image, or zoom/fill, via the Option button on the remote control. However, this will only work if you've adjusted one of the player's settings. Head to Setup on the Oppo's home screen, then Video Output Setup, then TV Aspect Ratio and select 16:9 Wide (rather than 16:9 Wide/Auto, which appears to be the default). Before I'd made that change, I was unable to affect the size/ratio of the 2.40:1

improvement in sound quality. Any thoughts would be appreciated.

Dean

Mark Craven replies: The good news is there are plenty of smallscale 5.1 speaker packages available for less than £1,000. The bad news is

image from a number of discs, including *Mad Max: Fury Road* (UHD), *The Fast and The Furious: Tokyo Drift* (UHD), *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (UHD), and *The Equalizer 2* (BD). Most likely you've already made that settings adjustment on your Oppo, but check it hasn't been reset somehow.

Now, this was all achieved using a Samsung Q8 LCD TV and Panasonic DX Series LCD. You say it's your Sony TV that is causing the issue, but unfortunately I can't replicate the situation with the hardware I have available.

I am a bit confused when you say that this works with some 4K Blu-rays and not others, suggesting that it isn't your TV causing the issue, but the mastering of the discs themselves.

I'll turn, then, to other HCC readers for help – has anyone else hit a brick wall when trying to stretch or zoom a 4K Blu-ray in their setup?

Regards the 'black bars debate', I'm also interested to hear further opinion. As stated, I leave them intact because I appreciate the framing choice of the content creator – that's before even getting into the degradation in image quality bought about by the manipulation involved.

As for a 4K Freesat box, 2019 should see some development – Freesat announced in late 2018 that it had partnered with tech corp ARRIS to work on third-generation hardware that will enable Ultra HD content (presumably internet-delivered), and said the new box would be launched this year in 500GB, 1TB and 2TB PVR options (plus an HDD-free receiver). We'd expect PVR stalwart Humax to be onboard with this.

Star letter-writer Dean wins a copy of the action-packed WWII horror-thriller *Overlord* on Blu-ray. Produced by J.J. Abrams, this genre mash-up follows a squad of US soldiers on a mission behind enemy lines, who must battle against the results of horrific Nazi experiments. *Overlord* is available to own on Digital Download from March 4, and on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray™ and DVD from March 11, courtesy of Paramount Home Media Distribution.



there are so many smallscale 5.1 speaker packages available for less than £1,000 that it can be hard working out where to start.

Your Mission FS1 package (now discontinued) is, indeed, utterly gorgeous, with slender satellite cabinets and a sci-fi-styled subwoofer. Finding something as

eye-catching yet discreet might be a push these days, as aesthetics have moved on. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't aim for an upgrade. Your £1,000 budget is by no means meagre, and your new 4K display/player and modern AVR deserve some new partners.

Q Acoustics' 3010i 5.1 pack (reviewed this issue, £900) is certainly a potential purchase. You sent a picture of your TV unit, and I think the 15cm-wide bookshelf speakers should fit either side of your OLED TV, and the 43cm-wide centre channel will tuck into the space in your cabinet. Q Acoustics also sells stands (£150-per-pair), letting you accommodate the two surrounds, and the slimline subwoofer is easier than most to squirrel away in a living room. Sound performance is superb for the money. Yes, the subwoofer has its limitations when it comes to slam and depth, but it's well-matched to the rest of the array and still brings the weight and scale you want.

The 10in driver in the W10 subwoofer in Monitor Audio's Bronze B1 package no doubt makes more of an impact, but is notably larger. Again, housing the rest of the speakers in your room should be doable.

You may be tempted to look at systems using smaller speakers, but considering an Atmos upgrade (now or later) is on the cards, size again is a factor. Systems such as Monitor Audio's MASS come with small satellites (and a punchy subwoofer) that deliver a great performance, but won't let an Atmos upfiring perch on top without attracting odd looks or requiring Blu-tack.

Therefore, if you're set on Dolby Atmos, Focal's Sib Evo 5.1.2 set is worth auditioning. Now available for around £900, this builds upfiring drivers into the main front L/R pair, while keeping the size of the centre speaker down. It's a good performer too, although hardly stylish. Stands are £170-per-pair.

Other more left-field suggestions? Wharfedale's DX-2 HCP 5.1 system is smaller



Wharfedale's DX-2 HCP is a smart budget choice

in cabinet size than the Q Acoustics or Monitor Audio packages and brilliantly priced at £400, leaving you money in the bank for 4K Blu-rays, while KEF's E305 'Egg' array (£700) is probably the closest you'll get to your Mission setup in terms of style, and I imagine its Uni-Q drivers give a fuller sound than your current speakers' NXT units.

At this point, you're best advised to go to your local AV retailer and demo prospective systems, if you can.

LG OLED not playing DV ball?

After doing a bit of research I updated my TV to an LG OLED65B8 SLC – mainly for the fact it offered more choice in HDR viewing.

Now I have a problem. In all the LG brochures I failed to see where I could not watch Dolby Vision movies from an external source.

Netflix works well showing the Dolby Vision titles but I really wanted to play my library of UHD Dolby Vision discs on my new TV. Did I shoot myself in the foot?
Pete

John Archer replies: Hi Pete. Are you certain your disc player is capable of playing Dolby Vision titles? I ask because the B8 I reviewed definitely played Dolby Vision from HDMI. LG has an 'HDMI Ultra HD Deep Colour' setting in the menus, which it says does need to be set to 'On' to handle a 4K source at 4:2:2 or 4:4:4 chroma sampling. This possibly might be an issue with your deck if it's set to 'Off', although in my experience it automatically switches to 'On' as and when required by a source.

Elsewhere in your letter you wondered if the TV's HDMI spec might be outdated, due to the arrival this year of HDMI 2.1. However, all four of the B8's HDMI inputs are HDMI 2.0b with HDCP 2.2, and can handle Dolby Vision (the format is actually designed to even run over HDMI 1.4a ports!).

One off the list

The missing Blu-rays in the Star Letter in HCC #294 include several of my favourites, but I have good news. *The Quiller Memorandum* is available in this format – I found it on Amazon for £8.19. Sadly no sign of *Klute* [pictured], the one I really want to see.
Richard Williams ■



Contact us...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Suite 25, Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com
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LG's B8: Dolby Vision ready



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WIN! Great Blu-rays up for grabs...

Head over to www.homecinemachoice.com/competitions to be in with a chance to win

Vestron Collector's Series Blu-rays

Lionsgate UK is unleashing a third wave of video-era cult classics as part of its Vestron Collector's Series Blu-ray imprint. *Class of 1999*, *Parents* and *The Unholy* are available to buy from February 25 and each comes loaded with special features. To celebrate the releases, we have five sets of the *Class of 1999*, *Parents* and *The Unholy* Blu-rays to give away!

Question:

The Unholy's Ben Cross starred in which Academy Award-winning sports movie?

Answer:

- A) *Rocky*
- B) *Chariots of Fire*
- C) *Million Dollar Baby*



Before We Vanish

Japanese filmmaker Kiyoshi Kurosawa's latest delivers a mash-up of sci-fi, rom-com and apocalyptic thriller with its story of a trio of aliens taken over the bodies of

human hosts in order to explore our world. *Before We Vanish* is out now on Blu-ray – and thanks to Arrow Video, we have five copies up for grabs.

Question:

Kiyoshi Kurosawa directed which modern classic of the Japanese horror genre?

Answer:

- A) *Ring*
- B) *Audition*
- C) *Pulse*



First Man

The celebrated biopic *First Man* is out now on 4K Ultra HD™, Blu-ray™, DVD and Digital from Universal Pictures Home Entertainment. To mark the release we're giving one lucky reader the chance to win both the *First Man* Blu-ray and a copy of Titan Books' *First Man: The Annotated Screenplay*.

Question:

First Man is based on the true story of which pioneering astronaut?

Answer:

- A) Neil Armstrong
- B) Yuri Gagarin
- C) Tim Peake



Wheels on Meals

Hong Kong action legends Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao star in this 1984 action comedy, which makes its UK Blu-ray debut on March 18 courtesy of

Eureka Entertainment. To celebrate the release we have five copies of Eureka's newly restored, feature-packed *Wheels on Meals* Blu-ray to be won.

Question:

Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao also starred together in which of these films?

Answer:

- A) *The Big Brawl*
- B) *Dragons Forever*
- C) *Police Story*

To enter any of the above competitions go to www.homecinemachoice.com/competitions

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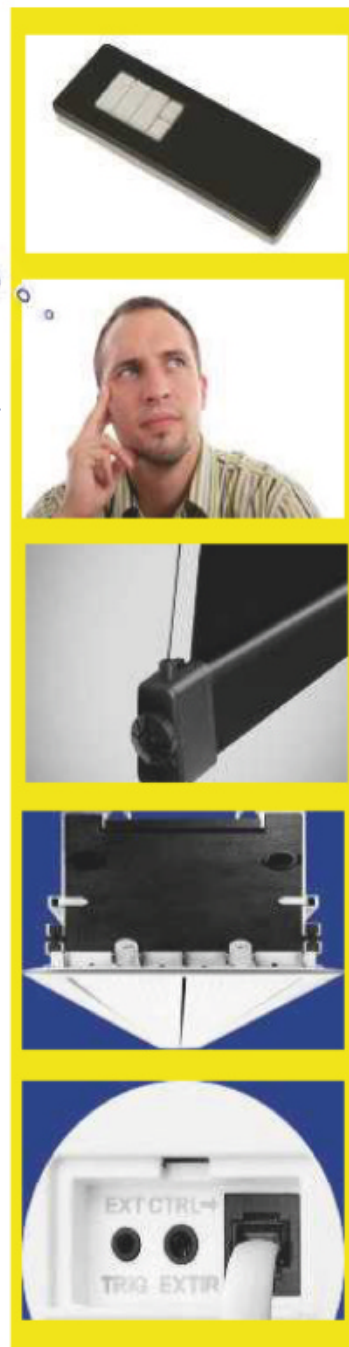
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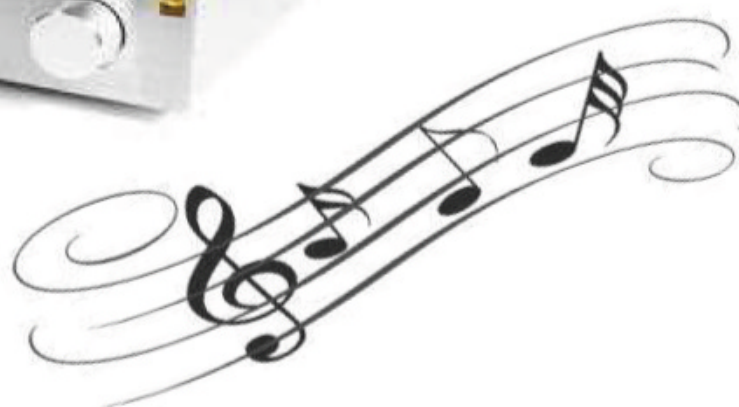
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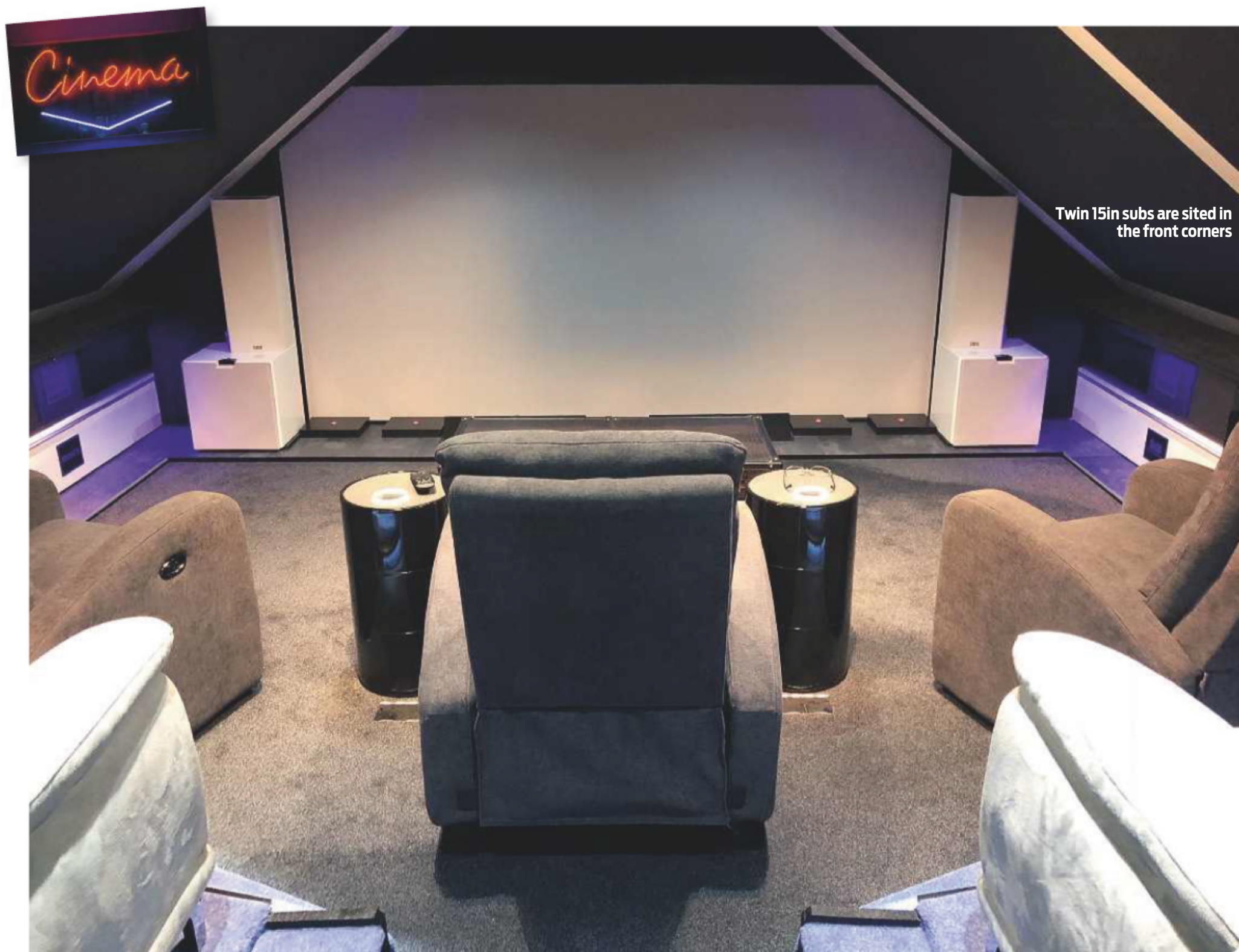


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HCC reader **Tony** discusses the immersive audio in his upstairs cinema room, the retro hi-fi in his downstairs media room, and why he has a new 8K upscaling projector on order...



Twin 15in subs are sited in the front corners



Welcome to the AV-Holic Hall of Fame! Introduce yourself...

My name is Tony Phillips and I will be 62 in March. I'm an electronics engineer by qualification, but have experienced many different jobs from retail to construction to marine taxiing – and running my own electronics business.

How long have you been into home cinema, and what was the first setup you had?

I've enjoyed any aspect of music and home

cinema since my days at school in the 1970s. I had two open-reel tape decks and a Linn Sondek LP12 in my sixth form study. I guess it is my escape from reality for a short while each day – we all need an interest – and a little bit of an obsession perhaps in my case. Whenever I chat to friends, particularly in respect to property or their homes, a home cinema is high on the list of requirements. My first house-build was designed around the size of the cinema screen with a CRT projector!

Whereabouts in your house is your cinema room?

I wanted very much to keep the living room (which is on the ground floor) as a day-to-day

family/visitor room. The cinema room, which was completed in January last year, is on the first floor partly in the roof space – I always strive to minimise the wasted space in a house – directly above the living room. At the opposite end in the roof space is a bedroom used exclusively by my wife as 'her' room, so we have a his-'n'-hers arrangement. It works well, although we don't treat it quite as literally!

Did you get help from professionals to do the build?

Only really regards the processor and projector from my local AV supplier, because it has taken me nearly six months to resolve HDMI



Visuals (3.2m wide) are projected onto dedicated screen paint



At the back of the room is a separate gaming snugg!

issues with these two items. The Sony TVs have also been an issue. I have learnt a lot in relation to HDMI, HDR and networking. I seem sometimes to overcomplicate an installation. If a piece of equipment has a number of inputs or outputs, I feel the need to use them all!

What kit's in your system?

For the main cinema area I have a JVC DLA-X7500 projector, Arcam AV860 processor and Yamaha MX-A5000 11-channel power amplifier.

My speakers are in an Atmos configuration, with four Tannoy S8-IWs as overheads, and KEF Reference TDM23 models for the LCR

(using two speakers for the centre channel). I have six surrounds (KEF TDM34DS dipoles) and six subwoofers – two Monitor Audio GXW15s on the front wall and four Tannoy TS2s around the room's two rear seats. The side surround speakers are wired in series, as are the two floor-mounted centres. I had my doubts as to how this would work out, but the Yamaha amp has no problems driving this setup. The centre channel, I believe, is often undervalued in cinema setups. Here, the sound just seems to 'float' in front of you from the image – only usually achievable with acoustically transparent screens. My screen (3.2m wide) is a painted one, with a light-grey tone from a UK screen paint supplier.

Sources are Sky Q, an Oppo UDP-203 (4K Blu-ray/SACD/CD), Toshiba HD-EP35 (HD DVD), Zappiti player, Apple TV 4K, Xbox One X, PS4 Pro, OSMC Vero 4K Kodi player, Mac Mini and a home-built Asus PC.

For lighting I have a combination of IKEA strips, Philips Hue spots and strips, and LED strips from China. Control is via a Harmony remote/hub and iPhone app/Smart Things/TP-Link combination which also controls heating and cooling. Amazon Alexa also provides voice control.

There's also a gaming/office area to the rear of the cinema room. Here I have a Sony KD-65X9305C 4K TV, Yamaha DSP-A2 amplifier, Xbox One S and PS4. And the TV is ➤



Seating for five includes a prime, central position

also fed from all main sources run through the Arcam processor.

Finally, I have another setup in our lounge on the ground floor. Here I use a 1080p 75in Sony TV, Denon AVR-X4400H receiver, Sony UBP-X800 Ultra HD Blu-ray player and SCD-CE595 CD changer, plus Apple TV, Sky Q Mini and another home-built PC. For music I also have an Akai GX-636 reel-to-reel player and a Thorens 280 MKII turntable.

Speakers, including the in-ceiling models, are B&W, plus a KEF TDM45B subwoofer. There's also a motorised 3.2m-wide Sapphire projection screen fitted in the pelmet above the TV, used with a Panasonic PT-AT6000E.

What's your verdict on the cinema's AV performance?

Because of the room treatments, audio is outstanding (the bass distribution undoubtedly helps), certainly the most coherent and immersive I have ever heard. Having tried the three main seating positions, audio balance is maintained throughout the room. The video performance is excellent with the JVC PJ, but because the seating position is deliberately close to enhance immersion in the content the resolution is important – hence my decision to replace the existing projector with the new 4K native/8K e-shift DLA-NX9. I've had a number of expensive screens over the years, fixed and electric, but I have to say that fixed is always preferable, and I really cannot fault the 'screen paint' treatment I have currently used – at £75 it seems like a bargain.

One other point worth making is the screen is cut off at the top corners, but this only is significant with 16:9 images – and, frankly, very little happens in this area! In any case, most content viewed is at 2.35:1/2.4:1, and this is where the image fills the screen horizontally.

What was the last bit of kit you added to the setup?

The Apple TV 4K and the OSMC Vero 4K were the last two purchases – really to determine the experience from the Apple service for 4K



This storage unit packs source gear, an Echo Dot and a drinks fridge



Pull down the doors on our AV-Holic's side-wall cabinets...



...and you'll find storage for his 2,000+ discs

and how it compares with disc playback, and to use Kodi as a player for my 2,000-odd DVDs and Blu-rays and 50 or so 4K discs. The interfaces are great, it's just a shame that the Apple service does not allow 4K downloads so an internet connection is not always so vital.

I use both Netflix and Amazon frequently, and even YouTube – the quality really is good and I am fortunate to have a typical internet speed between 20Mbps and 50Mbps, and because it's a business BT account there is no restriction to downloads.

Share your cinema system in the mag!

If you want to be in **HCC**, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. Here are a few tips...

1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing – we will make them print-ready.
2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we can print them.
3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch

- movies in the dark, our cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.
4. Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.

5. Don't be shy. Send a picture of yourself!
6. Show us more. Got pictures of your room before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

Now what?

Email your images to **letters@homecinemachoice.com** with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and provide your answers to the relevant questions above – then we'll be in touch!



Tony's living room
also has AV secrets

What's your favourite bit of hardware and why?

I would have to say the KEF speakers in the cinema room. All were purchased on eBay, and considering their age and cost I am yet to hear a system to beat them. Of course the Arcam processor is something to do with the sound – it was a revelation after all the other receivers I have had (Yamaha/Denon/Marantz etc). The price might also be a factor. Any source just sounds great – even YouTube.

Do you have your eyes on any hardware upgrades?

Always. That is a problem with the goal of perfection, which of course you will never attain.

As said, I have just ordered the JVC NX9 4K native/8K upscaling projector as image sharpness needs a bit of improvement. I am hoping that 8K e-Shift will do to most sources what 4K e-Shift did to 1080p content. It's a bit of a leap of faith, but I have always been an early adopter of new technologies.

How often does the cinema room get used?

As I say to friends and family, I spend five times as much time in the cinema as I do driving my car, which I also enjoy, so can therefore justify the expenditure – especially the new projector and perhaps an 8K TV when they are in their second or third generation for the living room

system. In fact, the answer to your question is most evenings. You can't beat a bit of *Strictly...* or *Dancing on Ice* on a 150in screen...

What discs do you use to show off the system?

This is a difficult one – there are just so many.

Ready Player One is very dynamic on the audio side, so is *Blade Runner 2049*. *Oblivion* and *Lucy* are also favourites, as is *The Dark Knight*. For all their critics, I do enjoy moments in the *Transformers* movies and my all-time favourite demo disc would have to be *The Fifth Element*.

And what are your top 5 favourite films?

The Fifth Element, *The Dark Knight*, *Gladiator*, *Burlesque* (the audio is great) and *Transformers* (all of them).

Do you stream movies/TV from Netflix, Amazon, Sky, etc?

Yes, from all.

Lastly, what do your friends and family think of the cinema room?

All are impressed and enjoy a good movie/boxset or bit of music – and love a bit of gaming on *Battlefield*. The only negative is that my son is concerned that my house insurance might not cover any damage from the bass! ■



Our AV-Holic's second setup features a Denon AVR and B&W speaker system, and some retro hi-fi in the shape of an Akai reel-to-reel player

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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **FIRST MAN** Neil Armstrong biopic blasts off in 4K **A STAR IS BORN** We've gone gaga for this romantic musical drama on Blu-ray **BAD TIMES AT THE EL ROYALE** Twisty thriller from the brains behind *Cloverfield* **HALLOWEEN** No tricks, all treats? **OVERLORD** War is hell in this blood-curdling action-horror hybrid **& MORE!**

The show must go on!

Bohemian Rhapsody → Twentieth Century Fox → All-region BD

The long-awaited Freddie Mercury biopic was a smash at the box office and is scooping up awards all over the place. But how does *Bohemian Rhapsody* measure up on your home cinema? Turn the page to find out if the Blu-ray release will rock you...

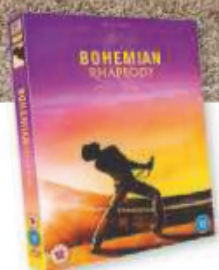
HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed



A large part of the film's \$55m budget was presumably spent on wigs



Another one bites the dust

Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a downslide, no escape from mediocrity...

→ BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

Opening on the day of Live Aid, this rock biopic then flashes back to the 1970s to chart the story of rock band Queen and its lead singer Freddie Mercury, leading up to that unforgettable performance.

The issue with biopics like this is that the fans will already know the story (and how it ends). As such, those that really stand out from the crowd are the films that reveal things we didn't already know. *Bohemian Rhapsody* isn't one of those. Not only does it follow the music biopic formula to the letter, it even goes out of its way to change real events in order to make sure the story it tells lands on all the (overly-)familiar beats.

The result is a thoroughly sanitised tale that is devoid of drama or tension (no matter how much the script repeatedly rewrites history in an attempt to try and generate some). It's a shame, too, as the cast do some very good work – especially Rami Malek, who succeeds in capturing both Mercury's strutting stagecraft and his lonely isolation.

The other plus, of course, is the music. The way the creative process is depicted in the film may be incredibly trite, but even that can't take away from the power and presence of the iconic tunes littering the soundtrack.

Picture: One viewing of *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s AVC 2.40:1-framed 1080p encode is all it will take to leave home cinema fans singing its praises.

Originating as a mix of 6.5K and 3.4K digital photography, the Blu-ray's image is crisply delineated



and finely textured. Even an occasional fondness for backlighting (which has a tendency to wash out black levels) doesn't take away from the intricacies on show. Brightness peaks are impressive too, while colours are wonderfully bold.

It's just a shame the digital crowds created for some of the gigs stand out as obviously being rendered at a lower resolution.

Audio: This Full HD Blu-ray proffers a DTS-HD MA 7.1 track, while the 4K BD release keeps the film's original Atmos mix. Thankfully, it's still a bit of a barnstormer – use of the surrounds is seamless and pervasive, both in the big concert scenes and when it comes to more subtle spot effects and atmospherics. Dialogue is also strong throughout. Best of all, the mix brings plenty of scale and pounding bass to the music.

Extras: In addition to the full 22-minute recreation of the Live Aid gig (featuring two extra songs not featured in the final cut of the film),

Bohemian Rhapsody's Blu-ray extras include a trio of *Making of...* featurettes. Running anywhere between 16 and 22 minutes, they are pleasingly substantial and do a fine job of covering various aspects of the production.

It's notable, however, that neither original director Bryan Singer – nor his replacement Dexter Fletcher – are anywhere to be seen. **AvB**

HCC VERDICT

Bohemian Rhapsody

→ Twentieth Century Fox

→ All-region BD → £25

WE SAY: Looks great. Sounds even better. But this lacklustre rock biopic plays everything far too safe.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



Smallfoot

Warner Bros. → All-region BD
£25



The Warner Animation Group tries to muscle in on Disney's territory with this CG musical-fantasy. The results are mixed, to say the least. On the one hand, it's got some good gags and the setup (a spin on the traditional Bigfoot story, with a Yeti heading out into our world to capture a mythical 'smallfoot') is pretty cute. On the other hand, the songs are instantly forgettable and James Corden voices the main human character. As you would expect from a modern CG cartoon, the 1080p encode is pretty much flawless, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is a booming, boisterous affair. **AvB**



Crazy Rich Asians

[4K]
Warner Bros. → Ultra HD Blu-ray &
All-region BD → £30



The *Black Panther* of rom-coms, *Crazy Rich Asians* made waves last year by proving that a film with an all-Asian cast could clean up at the US box office. The film's success was doubtless helped by the fact that it adheres to the familiar rom-com template, and does so with enough wit and good feeling to make it stand out from the crowd. The glitz and luxury that pervades the film's story also results in a vibrant 2160p UHD encode packed with rich colours. Vivid DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics provide the perfect aural accompaniment. **MC**



Mile 22

STX Films → Region B BD
£25



Mark Wahlberg's fourth collaboration with director Peter Berg sees an elite team of US operatives escorting an asset through hostile territory. Sadly, Wahlberg and co-stars Iko Uwais, Lauren Cohen and Ronda Rousey can't stop *Mile 22* being a total dud – whatever thrills exist in the story are ruined by hyperactive editing, rendering everything from action to conversations visually incoherent. Although shot in 8K and mastered at 4K, *Mile 22* isn't getting a UHD release, but it does look spectacular whenever the camera stops jerking around for a nanosecond. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is pretty epic, too. **AvB**



'You're music to my eyes...'

Cooper and Gaga's musical melodrama hits the right notes on Blu-ray

→ A STAR IS BORN

Stopping off at a drag bar after playing a concert in California, hard-drinking, pill-popping country-rock musician Jackson Maine (Bradley Cooper) becomes besotted with aspiring singer-songwriter Ally (Lady Gaga). Inviting her to his next concert, Jackson convinces Ally to join him on stage to perform one of her songs and, as the title says, a star is born. But as Ally's star rises, so Jackson continues to sink into a mire of alcoholism and drug addiction...

You'd be forgiven for thinking that a new version of *A Star is Born* is the last thing anybody would need. It is, after all, a cinema story that has already been told numerous times before – and one of those was the universally adored 1954 film featuring Judy Garland and James Mason.

But a good story is a good story no matter how many times you've heard it, and Cooper (making his directorial debut) has the sense to treat the melodramatic material with absolute sincerity. Add to that the electrifying chemistry between Cooper and Gaga (who gives a genuinely award-worthy performance) and you end up with a beautiful, believable and heartbreaking romance that feels fresh and new. And yes, even though we've seen the other versions and knew exactly where the story was going, there were still tears at the end. Bravo.

Picture: *A Star is Born* comes to Blu-ray with a sumptuous AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode that is as accomplished as Cooper's movie.

From warm interiors and naturalistic exteriors to the saturated washes of primary colours used during some of the concert scenes, the shifting palette is



Caught in a bad romance...

expertly handled. High-yield textures are abundant, never more so than in the detail-packed close-ups of himself and Gaga that Cooper favours so frequently. Meanwhile, flawless black levels and contrast bring a razor-sharp clarity to the 1080p imagery.

Audio: The disc's Dolby Atmos mix isn't a showstopper in terms of object-based effects, preferring to focus on adding a sense of depth and scale to *A Star is Born*'s musical performances. The mix also draws you into its soundscape with ambient effects, while the dialogue sounds entirely natural.

Extras: *The Road to Stardom...* is a far better than expected half-hour featurette that includes plenty of screen test and behind-the-scenes footage – still, a longer, more in-depth *Making of...* doc would have been appreciated. The BD also includes a trio of deleted/impromptu musical performances and four music videos. **AvB**



HCC VERDICT

A Star is Born

→ Warner Bros. → All-region BD
→ £25

WE SAY: A little light on extras, but otherwise a great HD outing for this heartbreaking musical melodrama.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Shooting for the moon

We find out if Damien Chazelle's acclaimed Neil Armstrong biopic sticks the landing as it touches down on Ultra HD Blu-ray...



→ **FIRST MAN**

At first glance, picking the director of *La La Land* for a biopic of first man on the moon Neil Armstrong (played with conviction by Ryan Gosling) doesn't look like a particularly logical choice. The longer *First Man* goes on, though, the more inspired the selection of Damien Chazelle begins to look.

For starters, he knows his way around a set-piece. Or rather, he knows how to create a set-piece so that you feel you're in it, rather than just watching it. *First Man*'s tight interior photography gives you a terrifying sense of what it was like to be flung into space in little more than a big 1960s bucket.

Focusing on the claustrophobia of the cockpit rather than the vastness of space for all but the climactic final moon landing also fits with Chazelle's desire to make *First Man* more about the man behind humanity's most remarkable achievement than the achievement itself. Although a downside to this is that the pacing is often more pedestrian than you might expect; Armstrong's drab bungalow seems like it gets more screen time than NASA and the moon. However, it also prevents the film from descending into mere gung-ho, flag-waving spectacle, instead giving viewers a passionate and absorbing look at arguably history's most reluctant hero.

Picture: While most of *First Man* was captured on shot on 35mm film, the intense cockpit interiors were filmed in 16mm, and at the other end of the spectrum, the sequence on the moon was shot using IMAX cameras.

This patchwork of formats leads to an up-and-down 4K Blu-ray release in terms of cinematic spectacle; exposing the shifts in shooting techniques pretty sharply.

The IMAX footage on the moon looks jaw-dropping. It's incredibly detailed, absolutely pristine,



Ryan Gosling stars as NASA astronaut Neil Armstrong

devoid of artefacts and noise... you feel you could reach out and pick up a handful of moon dust. The 16mm cockpit sequences, however (including those in the lunar lander) look really pretty rough – grainy and alive with colour noise. The 'down-to-Earth' 35mm footage is cleaner, but there's still a noticeable sheen of slightly inconsistent grain.

That said, the various levels of grain don't spoil the viewing experience. Once you've realised you're not getting one of those 'perfect' 4K finishes, the grittiness of much of the presentation becomes perfectly appropriate – not least because it gives the movie a vintage feel.

First Man also gets a surprisingly aggressive HDR pass. The light of the sun and moon are more blinding than in the Full HD encode, while outer space looks blacker. Moon sequences are among the most extreme we've seen in contrast terms, especially when watching the excellent Dolby Vision master (which also provides extra refinement to the film's colour tones and grain). Beyond these extreme moments you'll find natural-looking daylight sequences and a three-dimensional depth to interiors, all aided by a sensitively expanded colour gamut that only occasionally pushes skin tones into slightly orange territory.

Audio: *First Man*'s Dolby Atmos mix (included on both the 4K and Full HD platters) is a masterclass in sound design. The tone is set from the off, as an engine sound slowly builds into an extraordinary, all-encompassing roar. And as the film progresses the mix has no trouble capturing the ambience of a dinky, rickety capsule on the top of a massive rocket being blasted through the atmosphere, or the sensation of spinning helplessly around in a tube at consciousness-threatening speeds.

While the space scenes are the star of the show, the domestic sequences are also treated with a rare deftness when it comes to subtle atmospherics and expert use of music. The score is brilliantly mixed throughout the film – not least because, as Chazelle points out in one of the extras, the onscreen action is edited to keep time with what the director realised early on was a potentially Oscar-worthy effort from composer Justin Hurwitz.

There's also a lovely treat for Dolby Atmos fans at the end of the closing credits, as radio footage from the original Gemini 8 mission floats around the soundstage above your head.

Extras: The highlight of the bonus material – after a rather dry start – is a commentary by Chazelle, screenwriter Josh Singer and editor Tom Cross. Two deleted scenes are worth a spin, too (although they don't add much to the film), while a collection of eight short featurettes provide passable background on all the elements of putting such a varied film together. **JA**





According to cinematographer Linus Sandgren, the spacecraft interiors were shot on 16mm because 35mm made them 'look too much like a movie'



HCC VERDICT

First Man

→ Universal Pictures → UHD Blu-ray & all-region BD → £35

WE SAY: This slow-burning biopic delivers plenty of 4K thrills with its stellar sonics and demo-grade IMAX sequence.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



Gosling brought Armstrong's love of the theremin to Damien Chazelle's attention, leading to its use in *First Man*'s score

Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. **Rik Henderson** checks out a videogame vying for time on your home cinema system...



Resident Evil 2

Capcom → PS4, Xbox One, Windows PC → £55

There have been plenty of remasters and remakes gracing this generation of console gaming; some justified, some less so. But no matter how worthy, few have hit the heights achieved by this new version of *Resident Evil 2*. It is, quite simply, superb.

It takes the already much-loved 1998 original and almost makes it into an all-new game. Much of the story, locations and puzzles are instantly recognisable, but there are enough tweaks – some major – to offer a new challenge. Plus, it looks utterly incredible.

The latest version of Capcom's RE Engine is used to great effect, especially on PS4 Pro and Xbox One, where it almost reaches 4K (2,880 x 1,620). All versions aim for 60fps and, while a dynamic frame rate means it doesn't always hit the mark, it is a stunningly smooth playing experience.

Character models are excellent, as are the renderings of the undead. We defy anyone not to feel squeamish at the sight of the glistening entrails that are scattered throughout.

The key gameplay difference between this remake and the original is that the two main, playable antagonists (Claire Redfield and Leon S Kennedy) now have their own flowing storylines that crossover in a natural, movie-like fashion. Previously, you had to switch between them manually.

The rest is effectively the same, from the lack of ammunition that makes every bullet count, to the super-hard bosses that you encounter. This makes it a hard, at times unforgiving game that will take longer to complete than the story technically runs for.

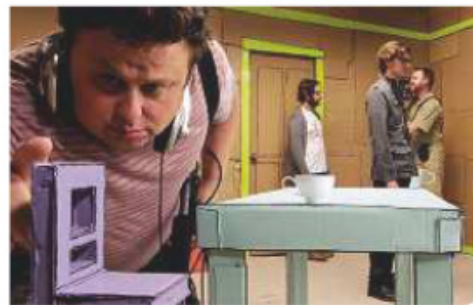
The new *Resident Evil 2* is easily one of the best survival horror titles around. The original was scary enough for its day, but now it actually looks the part too. We can't count the number of times we jumped, cursed or had to put the controller down completely while we regained our composure.

That being said, we advise playing it at night in a darkened room with either decent rear speakers or virtual surround headphones on. That'll really show you what you're made of. A big dribbling mess, if you're anything like us.



Dave Made a Maze

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£25



There's a whiff of Michel Gondry about this enjoyably absurd and inventive lo-fi indie flick, which sees a frustrated artist build a cardboard maze in his living room, only to get lost within its labyrinthine – and surprisingly deadly – confines. The film's handcrafted sets are well-served by a 2.00:1 Blu-ray encode that draws out the fine details in every piece of corrugated or torn cardboard. An unexpectedly evocative DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix provides effective back-up to the film's inventive visuals. Extras include a fun chat-track and extensive art galleries. **AvB**



One Cut of the Dead: Limited Edition

Third Window Films → All-region BD
£23



The first half-hour or so of Shinichiro Ueda's innovative genre film follows the making of a low-budget zombie flick that is interrupted by actual ghouls, all told in a single take.

Then the end credits roll and... well, to say any more would spoil the fun. Suffice to say that Ueda's micro-budget hit (costing roughly £21,000) is a clever and witty love letter to the lunacy of movie-making. This Blu-ray's Full HD visuals and DTS-HD MA 2.0 audio won't win any awards, but are undoubtedly true to the source material. The release includes a second disc loaded with great extras. **AvB**



Kin

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£25



Your enjoyment of this mash-up of family/crime drama and sci-fi thriller will largely come down to how you feel about a young boy's coming of age story that revolves around his possession of a deadly (albeit otherworldly) weapon. Even if *Kin* doesn't quite click for you, there's still a lot to appreciate about this Blu-ray release, from its colourful 2.40:1 visuals to its booming DTS:X sonics. There are also some great extras, including a fascinating hour-long roundtable chat with the likes of Kevin Smith and Laurent Bouzerau about extra features. **MC**



4K
ULTRA
HD

Chris Hemsworth regretted not taking his Pirion this morning...



The times they are a changin'

Stylish noir thriller announces the arrival of a new twist in the High Dynamic Range format war

→ BAD TIMES AT THE EL ROYALE

Bad Times... writer/director Drew Goddard has quite the CV. He penned many of the best episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *Lost*, and the well-received *The Cabin In The Woods* marked his directorial film debut. All the more surprising, then, that *Bad Times...* is something of a let-down.

Its premise – a bunch of ne'er-do-wells converge on an isolated hotel and really don't get on with each other – is solid in an old-school indie movie kind of way. It even has 'chapters'. The all-star cast (Chris Hemsworth, Jeff Bridges, Dakota Johnson...) work hard to bring their off-beat characters to life. Yet the dialogue isn't snappy enough, nor the story twisted enough, to elevate the film to the Tarantino-esque levels it aspires to.

Picture: Its 4K Blu-ray picture is actually more interesting than the movie, as it's the first feature film released in HDR10+. This, like Dolby Vision, adds scene-by-scene metadata to help a compatible display get the maximum impact from the HDR master. And it works really well, making a more emphatic and consistent impact than we'd expected.

The film's brightest highlights, such as the direct sunlight behind the head of Billy Lee (Hemsworth) on the beach, or the many lights in and around the El Royale hotel, all look

significantly more intense – but also more controlled – in HDR10+ than ordinary HDR10 (which the disc defaults to on a non-HDR10+ TV). There's a markedly more dynamic feel to almost every shot, further enforcing the stylised nature of lighting and photography. Colours – especially skin tones – tend to look more natural, presumably underpinned by more accurate light levels. Overall, HDR10+ enjoys an assured debut.

Looking beyond the HDR10+ conversation, the picture is generally good. Shot on 35mm film for a 4K DI, the image has a granular quality to it that you don't get with the Full HD Blu-ray. Detail levels are high, revealing some beautiful production design.

The SDR Blu-ray pales in comparison.

Audio: This 4K Blu-ray also scores big over the 1080p Blu-ray with its audio. While the latter gets a DTS-HD MA 7.1 track, the 4K release features a scintillating Dolby Atmos soundmix infused with aggressive transitions, a startlingly evocative sense of space (enhanced by some effective height channel use), unexpectedly aggressive moments, and a beautifully integrated score.

Extras: Bonus features are just a *Making of...*, picture gallery, and pair of trailers. At least the documentary is substantial, running to nearly 30 minutes and featuring some fantastic behind-the-scenes footage. **JA**



Russell Crowe was originally cast in the role that went to Jon Hamm (above)



HCC VERDICT

Bad Times at the El Royale

→ Twentieth Century Fox → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: This 4K encode delivers one of the biggest enhancements over the Full HD version we've seen.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



Diving deep into the Cold War

Old-fashioned action-thriller has plenty of fun with the submarine sub-genre

→ HUNTER KILLER

When a US nuclear sub goes AWOL playing cat and mouse with a Russian submarine in the Arctic, the USS Arkansas, under the command of Joe Glass (Gerard Butler), is sent to investigate. Glass may be gruff, but he's compassionate.

In no time, the Arkansas finds the wreckage of both subs, before being ambushed by what appears to be rogue Russian forces. Ping. Ping. Boom.

The plot then unwinds with all the elegance of a 10m extension cord. Its characters are etched in crayon rather than artfully drawn - none more so than Gary Oldman's hysterical Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ('WE'RE GOING TO DEFCON ONE!' he barks for no good reason).

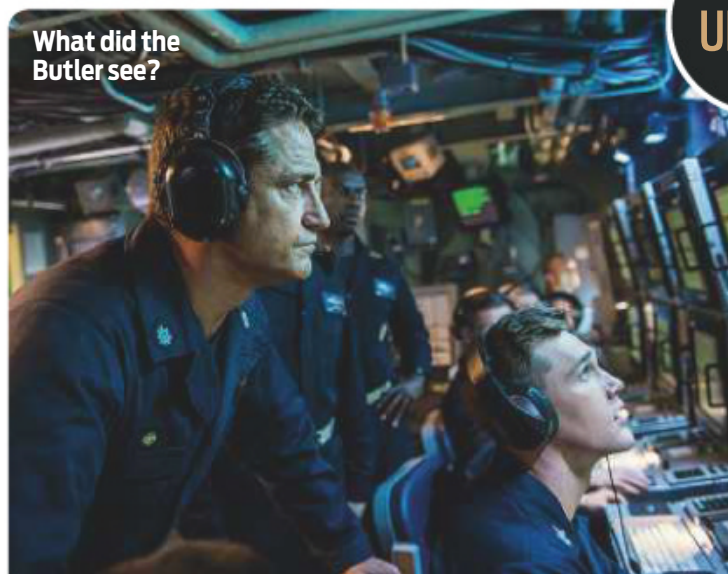
As a neo-B-movie, this supremely daft romp still manages to entertain, and even contains scenes of genuine tension. Butler is eminently watchable as the jaw-flexing seadog, and the action sequences unfold with engaging urgency.

Picture: Lionsgate's UHD encode delivers a boat-load of detail; colour depth is pronounced and the use of HDR is effective without being over-wrought.

The disc's clarity complements the production design. The interior of the titular submarine looks utterly convincing, even though it was actually built on a stage at Ealing Studios. Low-level detail adds greatly to the realism of the image.

The accompanying Full HD platter is also impressive, albeit without the same level of finesse.

Audio: Both the 4K platter and its Blu-ray sibling have a Dolby Atmos soundmix, and it's first-rate. Clanks, pings and echoes are beautifully illustrated,



4K
ULTRA
HD



and the sub-aquatic soundfield is absolutely convincing. When torpedoes carve through the ocean, the sound track pressure-loads your room before the impact. Then the entire soundstage dissolves into bubbles.

The score, by Trevor Morris (who also composed for *Olympus has Fallen* and its *London...* sequel) is sympathetically militaristic, and sound editing is top notch. The sniper headshots, as Navy SEALs make an escape, whip from back to front with devastating effect. The thud of high-calibre weaponry is also given a delicious low-level thwump.

Extras: Bonus features are lean but interesting. Both discs sport the same audio commentary by director Donovan Marsh, plus *Surface Tension: Declassifying Hunter Killer*, a two-part 25-minute behind-the-scenes look at the production. Too often such pieces are puff, but here you'll find some icebergs of interest. **SM**

HCC VERDICT

Hunter Killer

→ Lionsgate → Ultra HD Blu-ray & Region B BD → £30

WE SAY: A well-crafted 4K Blu-ray makes this submarine potboiler all the more entertaining.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Rogue Male

BFI → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£20



Based on the novel by Geoffrey Household, this 1976 BBC TV movie stars Peter O'Toole as Sir Robert Hunter, an

English sportsman and aristocrat who is tortured and left for dead after a failed attempt to kill Hitler. Surviving his ordeal, Hunter flees back to England only to find that fascist agents are still hot on his trail. Shot on 16mm, this enjoyable thriller hits Blu-ray with a decent 1.37:1-framed 1080p presentation, with only a handful of vertical scratches in the way of obvious wear and tear. Bonus bits include interviews, newsreel footage and extracts from Eva Braun's home movies. **AvB**



Climax

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£25



Described by director Gaspar Noé as his take on the disaster movie, *Climax* follows a dance troupe as they endure a

hellish night of insanity and degradation after their drinks are spiked, all set to a pounding electro-pop soundtrack. A sort of Dante's *Disco Inferno*, if you will. Painted in bold colours, and shot with cameras that rarely ever sit still, *Climax* may look kinetic, but its 2.40:1 encode is impressively stable. Meanwhile, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix does wonders for the music that underpins the soundtrack. Extras include a commentary and an overview of Noé's career. **AvB**



Class of 1984: Limited Edition

101 Films – Black Label → Region B BD & R2 DVD → £15



Director Mark L. Lester gave the 'terrible teens' movie an exploitative spin with this 1982 tale of an idealistic music

teacher who is pushed over the edge by the drug-dealing punks who rule a big city school. Seemingly based on the same HD source as Shout Factory's 2018 US Blu-ray, this UK platter's 1.78:1 encode looks pretty good, despite the occasional bit of dirt and other minor blemishes. As well as a chat-track and three interview featurettes that appeared on the US Blu-ray, this UK disc adds an informative 35-minute sit down with writer Tom Holland. **AvB**



Class of 1999

Lionsgate – Vestron Collector's Series
Region B BD → £25



Mark L. Lester's spiritual sequel to his 1982 cult favourite switches our sympathies to the kids (or a couple of them at

least) in a vision of the near future where gang violence has got so bad that one school brings in Terminator-style military cyborgs as teachers. Want to take a guess at how that goes? This fun but silly sci-fi-horror hits BD with a modest 1.85:1 encode that is colourful enough, but lacks sharpness. The DTS-HD MA 2.0 mix has plenty to do with the shootouts and other action scenes. As usual with Lionsgate's 'Vestron Collector's Series' titles, the disc is packed with extras. **AvB**



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Michael Myers and Laurie Strode last faced off in 2002's dismal *Halloween: Resurrection*

4K
ULTRA
HD



New film, same old tricks

It might not do anything new, but unlike earlier sequels this one at least gets the basics right

→ HALLOWEEN

How do you make a *Halloween* movie that is both reverential to John Carpenter's classic 1978 slasher and accessible to a new audience? If you're director David Gordon Green and his co-writers Jeff Fradley and Danny McBride the answer is simple: you chuck out everything that came after the original.

In doing so, their confusingly-titled sequel doesn't try to reinvent the wheel. Instead, it simply gets down to the business at hand – unleashing Michael Myers on the unsuspecting citizens of Haddonfield once again and setting the stage for an epic showdown with the sole survivor of his previous slaughter, Laurie Strode. In the process it finally makes 'The Shape' scary again, gives Jamie Lee Curtis a terrific role to sink her teeth into and – best of all – banishes all memories of Rob Zombie's misbegotten reboot.

Picture: Unlike its predecessors, this latest franchise entry was photographed digitally at a resolution of 2.8K, and finished using a 2K DI. As a result there's not a huge amount of difference between the UHD and Full HD transfers, with both looking very sharp.

There is the occasional uptick in resolution on the 4K version, but for the most part the two look almost identical when it comes to detail. Despite the swirls of digital grain added to the photography, the 2.40:1 imagery is free from compression artefacts, while the 10-bit encoding ensures a lack of any visible banding.

The inclusion of HDR10 does at least give the Ultra HD BD the edge in terms of colours, especially when it comes to skin tones and autumnal greens.



HCC VERDICT

Halloween

→ Universal Pictures → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: Not a huge step up from the Full HD release, but still well worth a stab for fright-fans

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Meanwhile the hospital gowns at the beginning are a brilliant white and pleasingly free of clipping.

The film primarily takes place at night, and it's here that HDR really adds value, delivering more detail in the shadows. The blacks are deep and free of either crush or noise, while the increased contrast ensures the 4K disc has greater depth in the image compared to its 1080p counterpart.

Audio: *Halloween* was released theatrically with both Atmos and DTS:X soundtracks, and Universal has opted for the latter on its 4K and 1080p BDs.

It's a decent mix but – outside of the climactic showdown – the overhead channels are used very sparingly. Dialogue is clear and the screams are full-bodied, but there's little sense of surround envelopment. Gunshots have a suitably ballistic thump, and the bass is used effectively during jump scares, but overall it's surprisingly restrained.

The high point is actually John Carpenter's music, with the maestro himself scoring the film alongside son Cody and collaborator Daniel Davies. The main theme is as relentless as Michael Myers, and reproduced with wonderful precision and fidelity.

Extras: Can anybody tell us what the thinking was behind bringing together John Carpenter, Jamie Lee Curtis, David Gordon Green and producer Jason Blum for a roundtable chat that only lasts four minutes? The four other behind-the-scenes featurettes are no better; running between three to six minutes, they're too short to function as anything more than glorified promo spots. The seven deleted scenes are more interesting, but still inessential. **AvB & SW**

Goosebumps 2

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£25



Rather than try to do anything new, this sequel to the 2015 family-friendly horror-comedy hit, based on the series of books by R.L. Stine, is content to retread familiar ground, albeit with far more Slappy the Dummy and far less Jack Black (he must have been on set for a day or two, tops). The resulting film is amiable enough, and should keep its intended tween audience happy for 90 minutes – longer if you include the kid-centric extras (which play automatically after the film). As for grown-ups, there's always the BD's frightfully good AVC 2.40:1 Full HD visuals and DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix to savour. **AvB**



The Little Stranger

Twentieth Century Fox → R2 DVD
£20



Domhnall Gleeson and Ruth Wilson topline this understated post-war neo-Gothic drama that subverts its ghost story setup to deliver an emotionally involving study of how memories of the past can shape and distort a person's future. Denied a Blu-ray release in the UK, Lenny 'Room' Abrahamson's low-key movie lands on DVD with a decent anamorphic 1.85:1 transfer that, thankfully, isn't prone to excessive aliasing (or at least disguises it rather well with its subdued palette). In addition to a short promo video, the DVD also includes an interesting audio commentary from the director. **AvB**



Horror Express

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£25



After years of having to put up with sub-par home entertainment releases (or, even worse, the horribly beat-up TV prints that are still in circulation), this undervalued 1972 fright flick finally gets the deluxe treatment. The centrepiece is Arrow's exclusive 2K scan/restoration of the original 35mm camera negative (with an interpositive substituted for the missing fifth reel), which is leaps and bounds ahead of all previous releases. Engaging extras include a commentary by genre experts Stephen Jones and Kim Newman, and an archival interview with director Eugenio Martin. **AvB**



The Unholy

Lionsgate – Vestron Collector's Series
Region B BD → £25



A demon who takes the form of a seductive red head sets out to corrupt and kill a New Orleans priest (Ben Cross) in this 1988 horror. Unfortunately, an impressive cast and enjoyably gloopy prosthetic effects can't quite overcome the many holes that litter this middling chiller's plot. In addition to a reasonable 1.85:1 Full HD encode (not flawless, but still the best the film has looked), this Blu-ray serves up some choice extras – the highlight being a detailed account of the film's myriad creature effects and what can go wrong when you hire a relative novice to create them. **AvB**



Hybrid horror fails to cut loose

Saving Private Ryan meets *Resident Evil* in this grisly J.J. Abrams-produced video Nazi

→ OVERLORD

When their plane is shot down over France on the eve of D-Day, the surviving US paratroopers make their way to a small village to complete their mission by destroying a German radio tower. But what they discover there is far more terrible than anything they had been prepared for – secret Nazi experiments that could alter the entire outcome of the war and the future of the human race.

Originally rumoured to be yet another piece of the *Cloverfield* universe, the J.J. Abrams-produced *Overlord* instead turns out to be a by-the-numbers WWII action-horror hybrid of the kind that experienced a surge of popularity during the late 1970s/early 1980s.

In itself, this is no bad thing – and this sometimes gleefully gory genre mash-up will undoubtedly find plenty of fans. But where *Overlord* falters is in deciding that due to the WWII setting it has to be serious and (relatively) believable. This runs counter to the schlocky nature of the material. What could have been a fun *Re-Animator*-esque dive into over-the-top horror instead ends up feeling constrained and unwilling to embrace the full insanity of its story.

Picture: From the black-and-white studio logos to the grainy faux-two-strip Technicolour appearance of the subsequent CG shots and vintage titles, *Overlord*'s opening minutes promise a retro-styled aesthetic that the film quickly abandons.

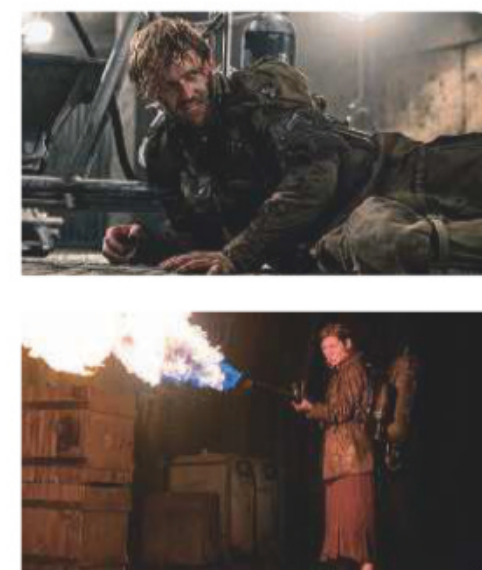
Instead, once the action comes down to Earth during Chapter 2, the film adopts a more modern appearance that accurately reflects the digital



photography. The resulting AVC 2.40:1 Full HD Blu-ray encode is frequently a joy to behold. Colours are bold, blacks are deep and there's a wealth of intricate detailing on show in the dirty, debris-strewn sets.

Audio: *Overlord*'s Dolby Atmos sound design is the one aspect of the film that really feels like it's been let off the leash. While the opening plane attack and parachute jump (Chapters 1 and 2) are arguably the most impactful and wholly immersive moments, the rest of the mix is no slouch. Steering is seamless, bass is incredibly deep and surround effects are delivered with astonishing precision. The result is controlled chaos of the highest order – crank it up loud and enjoy.

Extras: There's only one bonus feature, but at least it's a pretty meaty one. The six-part *The Horrors of War* (51 minutes) provides an equal parts enjoyable and informative look at the making of the film. **AvB**



HCC VERDICT

Overlord

→ Paramount → All-region BD
→ £25

WE SAY: A decent slice of action-horror schlock enlivened by superb AV performance on Blu-ray.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Ralph Fiennes put on 28lb for the role of Amon Göth by drinking Guinness



'This list is an absolute good'

Spielberg's masterpiece makes a strong case for releasing black-and-white films in 4K HDR

→ SCHINDLER'S LIST: 25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Schindler's List is perhaps Steven Spielberg's greatest film. His skill at combining a portrayal of the unparalleled brutality of the Holocaust with the touching personal moments within that horror is like nothing cinema has captured before or since. And it's all achieved while simultaneously delivering a sensitive and complex biopic. Unmissable.

Picture: Given the quality and weight of the film it carries, it's a relief to report that this new 4K transfer is lovely. This might sound a strange thing to say of a film depicting so much ugliness, but *Schindler's List* derives much of its power from the contradictory beauty of its use of light and shade, and Spielberg's often exquisite black-and-white 1.85:1 compositions.

The extra brightness range HDR can deliver makes this emotive use of light even more potent. Blacks look inkier, while bright areas reach higher levels of intensity without, crucially, becoming bleached or excessively grainy.

Spielberg apparently oversaw the regrade of the film. HDR is only used to enhance mood and the 'real' feel of daylight exteriors. Nothing has been invasively dialled up. If you're able to take advantage of the Dolby Vision transfer, the format's scene by scene information helps your display unlock the most dynamic but precise image possible.

True, the only colour for Universal's 4K BD's wide colour gamut technology to work with is a young girl's red dress, but *Schindler's List* definitively and



HCC VERDICT

Schindler's List: 25th Anniversary Edition

→ Universal Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: Spielberg's masterpiece benefits more from a 4K HDR transfer than you might expect.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

positively answers the question of whether HDR is worth applying to black-and-white content.

Audio: Spielberg also oversaw a new Dolby Atmos remix for this 25th Anniversary Ultra HD release, providing an upgrade over the previous DTS-HD 5.1.

As you might expect, care has been taken not to lose the naturalistic feel of the original soundtrack, but it does sound more involving; there's an enhanced sense of scale as the film moves between large and intimate environments. The beautiful piano score sounds more refined when it eventually arrives, and just occasionally there's a sense of an overhead effect – but only when a very specific shot demands it.

In other words, this is an Atmos mix that's wholly subservient to the imagery. There's nothing here that feels like sound for sound's sake.

Extras: Previous *Schindler's List* releases have only provided extras offering more historical context, rather than digging down into the actual filmmaking process. Here, though, a new 40-minute panel discussion shot in 2018 and featuring Spielberg and actors Ben Kingsley, Liam Neeson, Embeth Davidtz and Caroline Goodall is interspersed with some fantastic behind-the-scenes footage.

The other new feature is a short introduction to the USC Shoah Foundation (established by Spielberg in 1994), which collects video testimonies of atrocity survivors. You also still get the excellent 80-minute documentary about the real-life people portrayed in the film, which appeared on the 20th Anniversary Blu-ray. **JA**



Dazed and confused in Peru

It's no misunderstood classic, but Hopper's flop is still worth another look

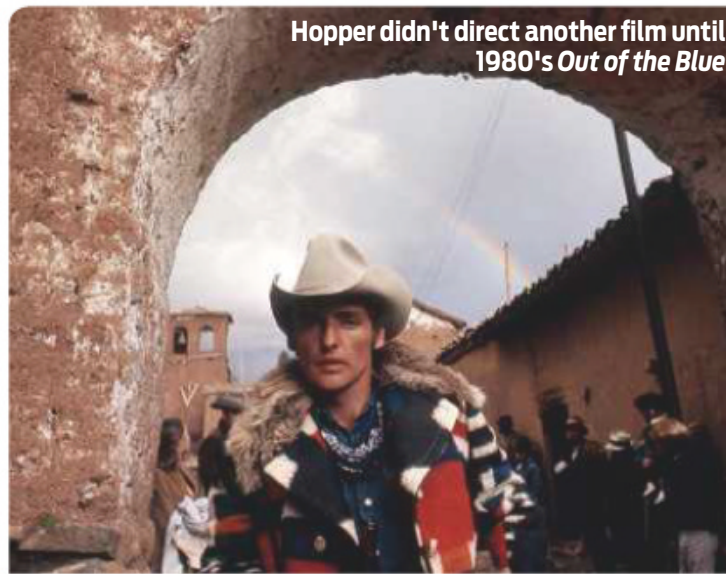
→ THE LAST MOVIE: LIMITED EDITION

Following the success of *Easy Rider*, Dennis Hopper was approached by Universal and given a budget of \$850,000 to direct a film with the promise of zero interference in the production. Universal was good to its word, too, and after spending some of 1970 in Peru shooting, and then even more time editing (and re-editing), Hopper presented the studio with *The Last Movie*.

Hopper stars as Kansas, the stunt coordinator on a Western being shot in a small Peruvian village. When the production ups sticks and heads back to Hollywood, Kansas decides to stay behind with the local woman he has fallen in love with. Before long, though, he learns that the locals are filling the void left by the film production by 'shooting' their own version of the movie using cameras made of sticks and indulging in real fights and shoot-outs.

Despite grabbing the critics' prize at the Venice Film Festival, *The Last Movie* fared less well on release, failing to find an audience or win over US critics. To be fair, it is a challenging film. Told in an increasingly non-linear fashion, it's fascinating ideas are frequently subsumed by formal concerns (not least its ending, or rather the complete lack of one) – and this doesn't always work in the film's favour.

But even while it isn't a complete success, the core themes and ideas at work in *The Last Movie* are interesting enough to overcome the film's messier moments. It's not for everyone, but if you've an interest in experimental cinema then *The Last Movie* should be on your radar.



Hopper didn't direct another film until 1980's *Out of the Blue*

Picture: Based on a recent 4K restoration of the 35mm camera negative undertaken at L'Immagine Ritrovata, *The Last Movie* comes to Blu-ray with an authentically textured appearance. Grain is coarse but well resolved, while fine details are present throughout. Colours are surprisingly bold at times, but never look artificially boosted. The disc's AVC 1.85:1-framed 1080p encode is rock-solid from a purely technical point-of-view.

Audio: As with the imagery, the mono soundtrack has been restored and cleaned up for this release. The resulting LPCM 1.0 mix isn't very exciting, but it's undoubtedly an accurate representation of the material.

Extras: Alex Cox explores the making of *The Last Movie* in both a new documentary and an essay in the accompanying booklet. Other goodies include an audio-only Q&A with Hopper from 1990, on-set 8mm footage, and a vintage 1971 promo. **AvB**



HCC VERDICT

The Last Movie: Limited Edition

→ Indicator → Region B BD
→ £18

WE SAY: Indicator has assembled an impressive Blu-ray package for this flawed yet fascinating film.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

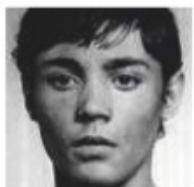
Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Diamonds of the Night

Second Run → All-region BD
£20



Czech filmmaker Jan Nemec found a different way to approach the subject of the Holocaust with his stripped down

1964 debut, which follows two boys as they flee a train that was presumably taking them to a concentration camp. Told almost entirely wordlessly, the film's oppressive urgency stems primarily from its stark black-and-white photography, which has been given a beautiful new 4K restoration for this BD. Quality extras include Nemec's related 1960 short *A Loaf of Bread* and an engaging commentary by film historian Michael Brooke. **AvB**



Born Yesterday

Arrow Academy → Region B BD
£25



Judy Holliday gives one of the all-time-great comic performances playing 'dumb blonde' Billie Dawn in this

hugely entertaining 1950 take on the *Pygmalion* story. No doubt based on the same HD master used by Twilight Time for its 2014 US release, Arrow's Blu-ray release of *Born Yesterday* looks superb, demonstrating a clarity and sharpness that belies the film's vintage. The LPCM mono audio is less exciting, but handles the shrill register of Holliday's hilarious vocals very well. Bonuses take the form of three academic appreciations of the film and its leading lady. **AvB**



World on a Wire: Limited Edition

Second Sight → Region B BD
£30



Revisiting Rainer Werner Fassbinder's two-part 1973 sci-fi TV miniseries today is a curious thing, simply because of how common the whole idea of simulated realities

has become in the intervening decades. Still, it says a lot about Fassbinder's talents that while the material may be familiar, *World on a Wire*'s philosophical approach ensures it's still as capable as ever of messing with your mind. Second Sight's two-disc Blu-ray set does an excellent job of replicating the grainy look of the original 16mm photography, and it boasts more extras than the Criterion Collection's old US release. **AvB**



DC goes back to the dark ages

Someone fire up the Bat-signal, these super-powered teens are seriously unhinged

→ **TITANS: SEASON ONE**

Come to *Titans* expecting a live version of *Teen Titans GO!* and you're in for a shock. This edgy reworking of DC's long-running teen team (first introduced back in 1964) is an altogether darker, bloodier and f-bomb festooned affair that is tonally closer to the Marvel Netflix family than any 'Arrowverse' show.

For fans of the comic, one of the real joys of *Titans* is discovering just how these familiar characters have been reinvented. Can the likes of Starfire, Raven and Beast Boy (Anna Diop, Teagan Croft and Ryan Potter respectively) really work in a quasi-realistic world? The show's solution is to overtly mix genres, between noir detective (Robin), unapologetic sci-fi (Starfire) and creepy-as-heck horror (Raven).

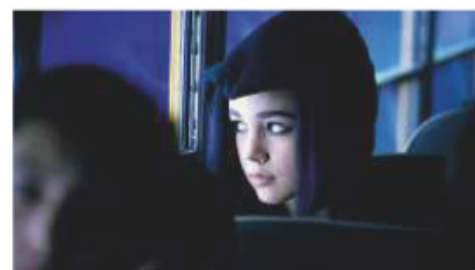
Of course, the central focus remains Dick Grayson (Brenton Thwaites), who plays Robin as a violent sociopath rather than a tights-clad cherubic teen. His weapons of choice are a bo staff and some customised ninja throwing stars.

Titans is the first wholly-owned DC Universe show, created for DC's US-centric streaming service but labelled a Netflix Exclusive for the rest of us. It's a significant win for the streaming giant, particularly as Disney seems intent on clawing back licensed Marvel properties for its own OTT service.

With *Doom Patrol* and *Swamp Thing* shows also incoming, this is another comic book universe that we're happy to binge on.

Picture: *Titans* is presented in 1080p at a (somewhat) cinematic aspect ratio

Anna Diop plays alien style icon Starfire



that appears to be 2.0:1. Much of the colour palette is largely muted (with the notable exception of Starfire's rich pink hair), so it's never going to zing off the screen, but the cinematography and production values are solid. Given that most of the visual effects seem to emerge from scenes of darkness, this mix of celluloid and shadows works well.



Audio: You'll want to turn up your AVR. *Titans* is probably the best-sounding superhero TV show since *Legion*, with the multiple voice actors mixed together to create Raven's dark alter ego a particular highlight. The sonic design shares the same gritty aesthetic as the picture, embracing a neo-realistic style; there's plenty of real-world ambiance worked into the 5.1 design, which goes a long way to placing the outlandish action in a believable audio context. **SM**

HCC VERDICT

Titans: Season One

→ Netflix (Warner Bros.)

WE SAY: DC's juvenile heroes are reworked with good effect in this gritty new Netflix series.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

→ **THE GRAND TOUR: SEASON THREE**

→ Amazon Prime Video

The boys are back for another run of petrol-head adventures, and little has changed. This third season of *The Grand Tour* follows the now-familiar formula, with Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond's globe-trotting escapades mixed up with studio (well, tent)-based chit-chat and actual reviews of cars (albeit usually very expensive ones). And it looks like being the last outing for this format, with Amazon announcing that in future – now the initial three-series contract has run its course – *The Grand Tour* will be a series of 'specials', focused on the around-the-world challenges.

That's probably a smart move as it's these sequences that continue to work best, no matter how contrived they may be. The trio have a great chemistry, and the locations (Mongolia, Colombia and China also feature) and vehicles called upon are typically interesting. Here, *The Grand Tour* becomes part car show, part travelogue. The Detroit jolly in this

season's opener making sure to convey the fallen grace of Motor City, a level of seriousness only slightly undermined by Clarkson's repeated diatribe about people growing vegetables.

As usual, there's a retro feel to the 14-episode series too. Racing driver Jim Clark is profiled, and '70s, '80s and '90s cars often feature.

The show streams in 4K HDR via Amazon Prime, with Dolby Digital 5.1 sonics, and looks resplendent, albeit a shade darker at times than its SDR variant – something that becomes a bit of an issue when the team return to the studio tent. There's heavy colour grading in play on much of the location footage too, so that blue skies appear almost impossibly rich.

Detail levels are excellent once your Amazon 4K app locks into place, and aesthetically *The Grand Tour* remains one of the most stylish-looking shows on television. **MC**



This series is the last of three commissioned by Amazon in 2015

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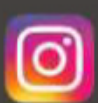
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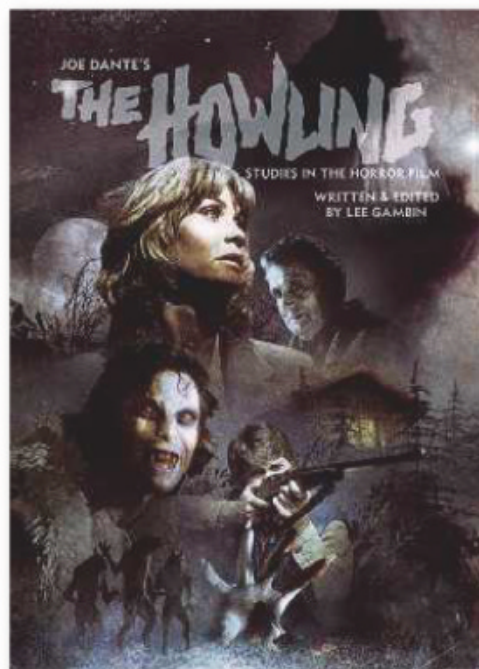
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Pyramid_AV

Where wolf? Look no further

This exploration of Joe Dante's lycanthrope classic will leave fans howling with delight



The Howling performed well enough to spawn no less than seven (terrible) sequels between 1985 and 2011

→ THE HOWLING: STUDIES IN THE HORROR FILM

Lee Gambin → Centipede Press → \$35

1981 was a landmark year for horror fans with the arrival on the bigscreen of two films that would revolutionise the werewolf movie: John Landis' *An American Werewolf in London* and Joe Dante's *The Howling*. While the former film remains as popular as ever, it often feels like *The Howling* has never really been given its due – a situation that film historian Lee Gambin sets out to remedy with this latest instalment in 'Studies in the Horror Film' series of books from Centipede Press.

If the author's name seems familiar, it's probably due to his Blu-ray commentaries for such films as *Carrie*, *Berserk* and *Homicidal*. Those of you who have heard any of Gambin's chat-tracks will be pleased to learn that he brings the exact same enthusiasm, knowledge and passion to his writing.

The book breaks the film down scene-by-scene, with Gambin recapping onscreen events and offering analysis of the themes at play, from the reoccurring topic of duality to satirical critiques of the media and Esalen-style 'healing' communities. The effusive praise for actors Dee Wallace and Belinda Balaski gets a little repetitive, but it hammers home how enthusiastic Gambin is about the film. And he's right: they really do give superb performances.

Interspersed with all of this are brand-new interview extracts from pretty much everybody you'd hope to hear from about making *The Howling*. This includes director Joe Dante, co-writers John Sayles and Terence H. Winkless, composer Pino Donaggio,



cinematographer John Hora and most of the cast – including the late, great Dick Miller, who sadly passed away on the day this review was being written. Together these interviews offer a fascinating, funny, comprehensive and only occasionally contradictory account of the film's production. The book is also illustrated with a wonderful collection of stills, rare behind-the-scenes photos and production art.

All told, it's enough to make you want to watch *The Howling* again – which is surely the point.

www.centipedeprss.com



30-Second Cinema

Pamela Hutchinson, et al → Ivy Press £15



As much as we all love certain types of movie, it never hurts to improve your all-round knowledge. But where to start? Well, this handsome, helpful

and (at just £15) pleasingly affordable hardback is a very good option. Inside you'll find snappy '30-second' (300-word) summaries of 50 topics across the broad spectrum of cinema history – from silent movies to home video – taking in key figures, genres and movements along the way. This may not sound like much, but the writers still manage to impart plenty of knowledge, so that every entry serves as the perfect springboard for your own voyages of cinematic discovery.

www.quartoknows.com

The Daleks' Master Plan – Original BBC TV Soundtrack

Demon Records → £100



The classic 'lost' Doctor Who serial *The Daleks' Master Plan* recently materialised on vinyl. First broadcast between

October 1965 and January 1966, only three full episodes of the 13-part story (including the *Mission to the Unknown* prelude) still reside in the BBC archives. Yet the full soundtracks do exist and are presented here across seven 180g blue translucent platters, with linking narration from actor Peter Purves. In addition to the standard edition, there's also an Amazon-exclusive 'splatter' vinyl version, limited to just 1,000 copies.

www.demonmusicgroup.co.uk

Welcome to Apolcalypseburg

The LEGO Group → £280

The LEGO Movie 2's answer to *The LEGO Ninjago Movie*'s epic Ninjago City set, this mammoth 3,178-piece set recreates the sequel's post-apocalyptic setting, with a ramshackle, makeshift town (including a coffee shop, tattoo parlour and armoury) built around the ruins of the Statue of Liberty. Of course, a post-apocalyptic town is no good without anybody to inhabit it, so the set also features 12 minifigures including Emmett, Lucy, Batman and, erm, the "Where are my pants?" Guy and Chainsaw Dave. The only downside as far as we can see is the whopping £280 price tag.

shop.lego.com/en-GB



Collecting...

Room service?

After spending the night at the El Royale hotel, **Team HCC** checks out ten more movies on Blu-ray/DVD where it's definitely worth checking in

PSYCHO

A secretary (Janet Leigh) steals \$40,000 from her employer and goes on the lam, stopping for the night at an isolated motel run by a nice young man (Anthony Perkins). The shocking events that follow are now enshrined in cinema history – but even when you know what's coming, Alfred Hitchcock's black-and-white 1960 masterpiece still delivers thrills and chills like few other movies can manage. It also spawned a fun franchise which so far runs to sequels, a remake and a hit TV series.

Get it: German label Turbine's recent *Psycho Legacy Collection* boxset is the definitive Blu-ray release to date. In addition to the original, three sequels, remake, 1987 *Bates Motel* TV movie and the 78/52 documentary, it's also the only way to get the extended German cut of Hitch's film on BD.



TOP PICK



LOST IN TRANSLATION

In this 2003 drama directed by Sofia Coppola, Scarlett Johansson's bored wife and Bill Murray's bored movie star cross paths in a Tokyo hotel and form a deep but brief friendship. Around the superb performances of the twin leads, Coppola builds a masterful mood piece, flitting between melancholy and comedy.

Get it: *Lost in Translation* was given a Blu-ray debut in 2011 by Momentum Pictures and hasn't been revisited since (bar a Zavvi Steelbook exclusive).



FOUR ROOMS

Tim Roth's bellhop provides the narrative link for this 1995 movie's quartet of stories all set in the same hotel on New Year's Eve, each written and directed by a different person (Alexandre Rockwell, Robert Rodriguez, Allison Anders, Quentin Tarantino). A bit of a curio, but not without its manic charm.

Get it: Considering the talent involved, the lack of a UK or US Blu-ray to follow its DVD release is a head-scratcher. Studiocanal has issued German and French discs with DTS-HD 5.1 audio.



GRAND HOTEL

Breaking from studio conventions, producer Irving Thalberg loaded this 1932 drama about the guests at a luxurious Berlin hotel with multiple overlapping narratives and populated it with the most star-studded cast ever seen in Hollywood (including Greta Garbo, John Barrymore and Joan Crawford). The result was an Oscar-winning classic.

Get it: Warner Bros.'s 2013 UK Blu-ray Steelbook can be picked up for under £20, and includes a fascinating, info-packed commentary track.



THE SHINING

Stanley Kubrick + Stephen King + Jack Nicholson = one of the greatest horror flicks of all time. It's a film with so many layers, themes and interpretations too, so always worth a revisit even if you've watched it plenty of times before.

Get it: The Warner Bros. Premium Collection Blu-ray released in 2016 (an HMV exclusive) marked the UK hi-def debut of the film's 144-minute 'Extended Cut' – aka the 'International Cut'. The 25-minute shorter 'European Cut' is also included, albeit on DVD.



BUG

Possibly William Friedkin's most out-there movie, this 2006 low-budget claustrophobic thriller traps Ashley Judd and Michael Shannon in the confines of a budget motel room, and watches as they hysterically search for the 'bugs' they believe have been implanted by evil government forces – naturally, it doesn't end well. An intense 100 minutes.

Get it: There's no UK hi-def release for *Bug* – and we doubt one is coming any time soon – so stick with Lionsgate's 2008 DVD, or drive yourself mad hunting for the European Blu-ray (and HD DVD) versions.



HOTEL RWANDA

In this Oscar-nominated true-story drama (2004), Don Cheadle plays Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel employee who saved the lives of over 1,000 refugees during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. It's a story that doesn't require any Hollywood-style over-embellishment, and director Terry George obliges, crafting a powerful, measured movie.

Get it: Another UK Blu-ray no-show (surprisingly), but there's an MGM US release that's region-free and is loaded with bonus features.



THE COCOANUTS

This early Marx Brothers movie finds Groucho running a Florida hotel and the brothers thwarting a jewel thief. As expected, it packs in plenty of laughs – and they don't come any bigger than the guffaws that follow Groucho and Chico's 'Why a Duck?' routine, which is up there with the funniest scenes ever committed to celluloid.

Get it: Expect to pay a pretty penny for Arrow's out-of-print five-film Marx Brothers Blu-ray boxset. Thankfully, a subsequent standalone BD, pairing *The Cocoanuts* with *Animal Crackers*, is still available.



1408

Stephen King's obvious issue with hotels (see *The Shining*) led to another spooky flick in 2007. This time around John Cusack plays a supernatural investigator/sceptic who becomes trapped in a never-ending nightmare when he opts to spend a night in the supposedly haunted room 1408 in New York's The Dolphin hotel.

Get it: Despite performing well at the box office, *1408* has never been granted a Blu-ray release in the UK. A variety of feature-packed region-free HD platters are available to import from Europe and the US, though.

THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL

Filmmaker Wes Anderson crafted yet another of his witty and meticulously designed cinematic gems with this shaggy dog story about Gustave (Ralph Fiennes), the devoted concierge at a famous European hotel, who must put his life in the hands of his young protégé Zero (Tony Revolori) when he is accused of murder. The end result is surprisingly touching, and so beautiful that you could hang any individual frame on your wall as a work of art.

Get it: The same extras-light Blu-ray has been released in every territory. This means that, unless *The Grand Budapest Hotel* eventually joins Anderson's other films in the Criterion Collection (or Fox decides to release it on UHD Blu-ray), the original 2014 Blu-ray outing is as good as it gets.



SELECT

→ **GEAR GUIDE** **TELEVISIONS** From entry-level 40in LEDs to flagship 4K monsters
BLU-RAY PLAYERS Which deck rules the roost? **PROJECTORS** It's time to blow up your video!
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Our **Top 10**
guide is here
to help



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

TOP 15 Televisions

01



Samsung QE65Q9FN → £3,000 ★★★★★

Revised QLED technology and the implementation of a local dimming backlight reap astonishing picture quality rewards with this bright, colourful 4K HDR hero. Great usability and smart platform, too. *HCC #285*

TOP 5 Blu-ray movies



The Equalizer 2
[UHD Blu-ray]

Denzel Washington delivers more vigilante justice in this efficient action sequel. Sony's 4K platter houses a more violent cut than the SDR iteration, and is sonically and visually strong too. *HCC #294*

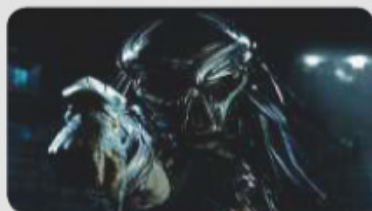
★★★★★



Venom [UHD Blu-ray]

Tom Hardy takes on the title role in this smash-hit comic book adaptation. The story may lack focus, but the AV (Dolby Vision/HDR10 and a pumped-up Atmos soundmix) has real bite. *HCC #295*

★★★★★



The Predator
[UHD Blu-ray]

This fun new sequel balances black humour with the expected grisly kills. Fox's 4K release sounds good and looks great, and finds space for some interesting extras. *HCC #295*

★★★★★



Mission: Impossible – Fallout [UHD Blu-ray]

This 4K release is a bit up and down when it comes to visuals, but audio is excellent and the franchise itself shows no sign of a drop in quality. Premium-class popcorn fun. *HCC #293*

★★★★★



BlacKkKlansman
[UHD Blu-ray]

The almost total lack of extra features takes the shine off this 4K release, but the movie is indispensable viewing for Spike Lee fans – sharp, witty and brilliantly acted. *HCC #295*

★★★★★

02



Philips 65OLED903 → £3,500 ★★★★★

Take impressive audio from a B&W-designed speaker array, OLED-delivered 4K HDR visuals that outshine the competition, and add a sprinkle of Ambilight, and you get the most exciting display Philips has ever released. *HCC #290*

03



Panasonic TX-65FZ852 → £3,000 ★★★★★

4K HDR OLED (with HDR10+ support) that offers subtlety and refinement in spades (particularly with colour presentation and near-black handling), making up for a slight lack of dynamic punch. Unobtrusive design, too. *HCC #290*

04



Samsung QE85Q900R

→ £15,000 ★★★★★

It's frighteningly expensive and you won't find any native content to play on it, but Samsung's 85in 8K debutant still wows. Ultra bright and an excellent upscaler of 4K sources. An upgrade to HDMI 2.1 is promised. *HCC #292*

05



LG OLED65E8

→ £4,300 ★★★★★

This Dolby Vision-enabled OLED boosts image quality on last year's E7 (it's brighter, for one thing), although its Atmos sonics are a tad less impressive. Tidy design and excellent UI. *HCC #287*

06



Philips 43PUS6753

→ £430 ★★★★★

Sharp, colour-rich, direct-LED images, plus Ambilight and Philips' bespoke SAPHI smart system, make this 43in 4K HDR LCD a smallscreen(ish) dream. Superb option for a second-room/budget setup. *HCC #291*

07



Sony KD-55AF9

→ £3,000 ★★★★★

Pricier than most 55in OLED rivals, but this Master Series Sony has a unique style, effective 'invisible' audio solution, Dolby Vision/Atmos support and lush 4K visuals. Good new Android OS, too. *HCC #292*

08



Sony KD-55XF9005

→ £1,700 ★★★★★

Impressive backlighting, dynamic HDR images and top-quality motion processing are the major draws of this mid-tier Bravia. Android OS still needs improvement, though. *HCC #285*

09



Samsung QE65Q8DN

→ £2,900 ★★★★★

Not as bright as Samsung's top-of-the-range Q9 (and with fewer dimming zones) but still an impactful 4K HDR performer. Excellent HD upscaling, and native motion handling is also solid. *HCC #291*

10



Hisense H75U9A

→ £3,500 ★★★★★

This 75in LED is the brightest display we've seen, yielding benefits with HDR content, while backlit illumination aids solid black levels. Sharpness and colour delivery are less impressive, but the price/size ratio is good. *HCC #289*

11



Hisense 55A6200

→ £430 ★★★★★

A great value option, despite brightness levels not doing justice to its HDR support. Visuals are sharp with solid black levels and finessed colour handling. 4K apps and decent audio round out the package. *HCC #295*

12



Hisense 55U7A

→ £800 ★★★★★

FIFA-branded 4K HDR flatscreen that makes up for a lack of HDR brightness through its image clarity and solid black levels. Strong audio and a clutter-free smart platform sweeten the deal. *HCC #287*

13



TCL 55DC748

→ £700 ★★★★★

While this budget UHD LCD can look bright, detailed and colour-rich, its whole-frame dimming engine and absence of motion compensation count against it. The JBL soundbar is a little underpowered. *HCC #289*

14



Sony KD-55XF8505

→ £1,100 ★★★★★

This mid-tier edge-lit Sony set has its strengths, particularly its onboard audio and bright room/bright content playback. But a limited contrast means it never feels overly cinematic. *HCC #287*

15



Hitachi 75HL16T64U

→ £1,350 ★★★★★

This 75in megascreen offers a lot of 4K image for not a lot of money. Predictably, picture quality can't match that of big-brand rivals – but the TV holds appeal if you're mainly after an SDR display. *HCC #285*

TOP 15 Speaker systems

01


Bowers & Wilkins 700 Series 5.1

→ £3,800 ★★★★★

This array finds the larger models in the 700 Series proving their mettle with formidable power and precision, an expressive mid-band and detailed highs. Excellent. *HCC #285*

TOP 5 On-demand


Bird Box [Netflix]

Sandra Bullock closes her eyes and hopes for the best in this well-constructed high-concept thriller. *Bird Box* is fast-paced and atmospheric, and has a 5.1/ Atmos soundmix that skilfully heightens the tension. *HCC #295*

★★★★★


Outlander: Season Four [Amazon Prime]

The historical time-travel romp moves its action Stateside for another 13 episodes of steamy romance and deft dramatic plotting, all told with convincing period detail. *HCC #294*

★★★★★


The Purge: Season One [Amazon Prime]

Taking the same premise as the popular film franchise but giving its character arcs more time to develop, this 10-episode season only manages 1080p SDR visuals but sounds sublime. *HCC #292*

★★★★★


The Haunting of Hill House [Netflix]

Immersive Atmos mixes, crisp 4K visuals and a knack of knowing exactly how to scare its audience make this serial update on the classic haunted house tale a genuine VOD treat. *HCC #292*

★★★★★


Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle [Netflix]

Warner's mo-capped reimagining of Rudyard Kipling's animal-packed fable (directed by Andy Serkis) skips a theatrical window and comes straight to your home cinema. *HCC #294*

★★★★★



M&K Sound IW150 5.1 → £8,550 ★★★★★

The in-wall IW150 speakers offer the transparency and detail of a professional studio monitor in an enclosure that can vanish. This array adds driver-matched on-wall tripole surrounds and M&K's fearless X12 sub. The result is outstanding. *HCC #289*



Wharfedale DX-2 → £450 ★★★★★

The asking price of this 5.1 system will tell you it doesn't offer the last word in surround sound fidelity, but Wharfedale's package is compact, well made and faultlessly delivers on its home-cinema-on-a-budget promise. *HCC #283*



B&W 600 Series 5.1

→ £1,850 ★★★★★

Continuum drivers replace Kevlar in B&W's entry-level speaker range, delivering a sound that's precise, transparent and highly entertaining. *HCC #295*



KEF Q Series 5.1.2

→ £3,300 ★★★★★

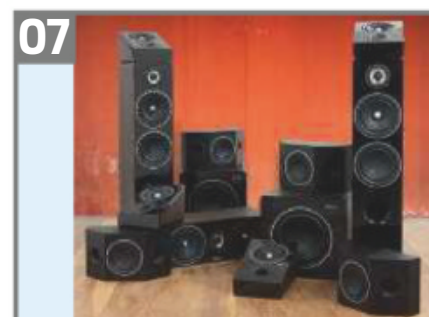
KEF's revamped Q Series now offers Atmos modules for an up-to-the-minute sonic experience. Big, bold-looking speakers. Robust, immersive audio. *HCC #280*



ATC HTS7 5.1

→ £3,500 ★★★★★

Brit brand ATC rejigs the driver tech and neutral sound of its SCM range into a wall-mountable, flexible system perfect for discreet AV setups. *HCC #275*



Elipson Prestige Facet 7.2.4

→ £3,500 ★★★★★

13 cabinets come together to create a great-value and immersive Dolby Atmos array. Rich in fidelity and neutrality; modern styling is another plus point. *HCC #291*



Q Acoustics 3050i

→ £1,350 ★★★★★

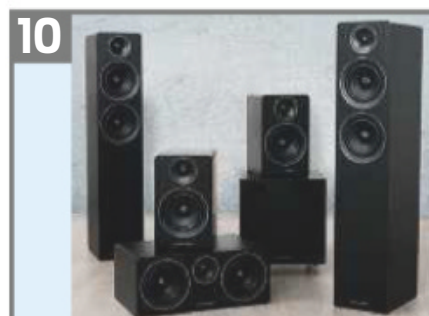
This update on the previous 3000 series makes subtle performance and styling improvements. The result is an excellent, well-priced, stylish package. *HCC #287*



Monitor Audio Silver 500 5.1

→ £3,650 ★★★★★

The new Silver range offers a potent EQ-able sub, sweet design, dipole surrounds and largescale, nuanced sonics. Atmos upfiring models would be nice, though. *HCC #282*



Acoustic Energy 100 Series 5.1 → £1,300 ★★★★★

Acoustic Energy's latest addition scores well on style, ease of install and price, and puts in a consistently entertaining multichannel performance. *HCC #286*



Wharfedale Diamond 11 HCP → £800 ★★★★★

Bookshelf speakers and 10in sub combine in a system that offers mid-range and treble finesse and a healthy dollop of boisterous bass. Fun and affordable. *HCC #279*



Klipsch Reference 5.1.2

→ £2,000 ★★★★★

Not the sleekest-looking speakers but Klipsch's array sounds big, bold and cohesive and is easy to drive. Solid subwoofer, too. *HCC #293*



Q Acoustics 7000i 5.1 Slim

→ £1,000 ★★★★★

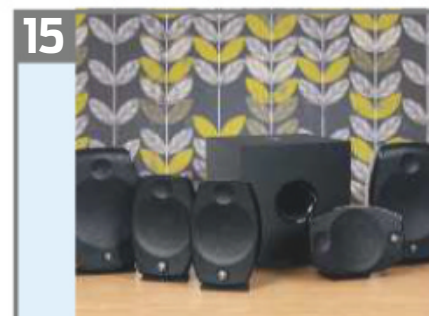
Consistent tonality and detail retrieval are the standout elements here, joined by a cute, easy-to-accommodate design – particularly the 7060S sub. *HCC #284*



Jamo S Series 5.1.2

→ £1,120 ★★★★★

An affordable package with drop-dead gorgeous styling, neat Atmos module integration and involving sonics – but the 8in sub isn't a beast. *HCC #290*



Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2 → £1,200 ★★★★★

Enjoyable-sounding and well-priced sub/sat system with Atmos upfiring in front L/R enclosures. Not the smallest 'satellite' speakers around. *HCC #276*

TOP 10 Projectors

01



NEW ENTRY

Sony VPL-VW570ES → £8,000 ★★★★★

This native 4K projector offers a top-flight UHD performance, and adds a dynamic iris and boosted luminance over the step-down 270ES. Still not the brightest model around, but in a dedicated cinema it shines. *HCC #295*

02


JVC DLA-X5900 → £4,000 ★★★★★

An outstanding performer at this price point. JVC's latest D-ILA model may lack native 4K silicon but its eShift 4K engine shows real improvement and HDR playback has been greatly boosted too. A compelling home cinema PJ. *HCC #282*

03


Optoma UHD51
→ £1,500 ★★★★★

This affordable 4K DLP model adds 3D playback (at 1080p) to its home cinema repertoire, making it an obvious upgrade for stereoscopy fans. Sharp, colour-rich and dynamic visuals. *HCC #287*

04


Sony VPL-VW270ES
→ £5,000 ★★★★★

Sony has refined the performance of its entry-level 4K PJ, improving contrast and HDR delivery, ensuring cinematic thrills. Bonus features include motorised controls and 3D playback. *HCC #293*

05


Epson EH-TW7400
→ £2,200 ★★★★★

HG playback is missing from the spec sheet but otherwise this 4K upscaling LCD PJ hits all the right notes. Setup tools include lens memory presets; images are bright, colourful and contrast-rich. *HCC #293*

06


Vivitek HK2288
→ £2,500 ★★★★★

The Taiwanese brand returns to the UK with a 4K DLP PJ that balances impressive HDR brightness with stable images. Excellent remote control and decent zoom and throw options. *HCC #285*

07


BenQ TK800
→ £1,200 ★★★★★

A lot of enjoyable performance crammed into a compact package. Offers 4K HDR playback, plus 3D, with only a limited black level and occasionally pushed colours counting against. *HCC #288*

08


Optoma UHZ65
→ £5,000 ★★★★★

The asking price here reflects Optoma's addition of laser illumination (yielding improved contrast and far greater 'lamp' life) to the DLP 4K and HDR playback talents of its stablemates. *HCC #282*

09


Acer VL7860
→ £3,500 ★★★★★

Laser 4K DLP projector that misses out on the contrast performance of some models, but undercuts them in terms of pricing. Use the Silent mode for whisper-quiet operation. *HCC #284*

10


BenQ W1050
→ £500 ★★★★★

There are a few cut corners on this budget DLP 1080p model (no backlight on the remote, no lens shift, a meagre zoom), but overall movie performance is good for the money. *HCC #283*

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TOP 10 Blu-ray players

01


Pioneer UDP-LX800 → £2,200 ★★★★★

A phenomenal universal disc spinner, which adds audiophile-grade music playback to its 4K BD talents. Includes Dolby Vision support, with HDR10+ promised via future firmware. Build quality is staggering. *HCC #293*

02


Panasonic DP-UB9000 → £850 ★★★★★

Supporting both HDR10+ and Dolby Vision, and incorporating useful image adjustments, this premium player is at the leading edge of UHD BD playback. The astonishing construction and provision of VOD apps heighten its appeal. *HCC #292*

03


Sony UBP-X700
→ £250 ★★★★★

A compact player updated to Dolby Vision support, the UBP-X700 has a nondescript design, no analogue outs and a stubby remote. But it plays great, and offers SACD support. *HCC #284*

04


Cambridge Audio CXUHD
→ £800 ★★★★★

The lack of analogue outputs is a surprise considering CA's heritage, but this universal (and DV-capable) deck sounds sweet over its digital outs. As with Oppo's UDP-203, a MediaTek SoC is used. *HCC #279*

05


Panasonic DP-UB420
→ £250 ★★★★★

Hi-res file support and HDR10+ compatibility make up for this deck's lightweight build and basic streaming app provision. Plenty of user tweaks on offer and a tempting price. *HCC #291*

06



NEW ENTRY

Panasonic DP-UB820
→ £400 ★★★★★

Panasonic's mid-ranger delivers on both the HDR10+ and DV fronts, and introduces multichannel analogue outputs. As with the UB420, the VOD portal could do with a style makeover. *HCC #295*

07


Sony UBP-X800
→ £270 ★★★★★

Sony embraces UHD Blu-ray with a full-width, sturdy design that'll also spin DVD-A and SACD platters. A great all-rounder, but no current Dolby Vision support or word on an update. *HCC #274*

08


Panasonic DMP-UB300
→ £130 ★★★★★

Great 4K imagery from this bargain 2017-era deck, but you might prefer to up your budget – no split HDMI, optical/coaxial or Wi-Fi connections here. Half-size design for an easy install. *HCC #272*

09


Samsung UBD-K8500
→ £180 ★★★★★

Debut Ultra HD Blu-ray player that finds fans courtesy of its sensible price point (now even lower), connected smarts and eye-catching visuals. Build quality is a little uninspiring. *HCC #260*

10


Samsung UBD-M9500
→ £230 ★★★★★

Second-gen 4K player that adds features (mobile BD streaming, 360-degree image support) but removes 3D playback capability. As before, the chassis is curved. UHD discs look pin-sharp. *HCC #275*

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Photo courtesy of UK Home Cinemas

TOP 10 AV Receivers/AV Processors

01



Denon AVR-X4500H → £1,500 ★★★★★

Denon's top-tier nine-channel AVR is due an IMAX Enhanced update shortly, topping off an already extensive, user-friendly feature set. Movie playback is dynamic and detailed, and two-channel music sounds sweet too. Superb. HCC #293

02



Arcam AVR850 → £4,500 ★★★★★

High-end seven-channel AVR marrying Class G amplification and Atmos support with talented Dirac Live Room EQ for an excellent performance. Lacks a few feature frills, but 11-channel pre-outs allow full-fat setups. HCC #257

03



Denon AVC-X8500H → £3,300 ★★★★★

For those want to go even bigger with their Atmos/DTS:X system, this flagship provides 13 channels of power. Setup can be complex, and there's no FM tuner, but otherwise this is first-class. HCC #285

04



Yamaha CX-A5200 → £2,600 ★★★★★

11-channel processor with MusicCast integration, XLR hookup and a trio of HDMI outs. Atmos and DTS:X support is bolstered by impressive Surround:AI DSP. Flexible and enjoyable. HCC #292

05



Marantz AV8805 → £3,600 ★★★★★

The most affordable 13-channel processor around, the AV8805 combines lean looks, setup flexibility and a musical, detailed sound performance. Uses Audyssey MultEQ XT32 calibration. HCC #288

06



NEW ENTRY

Marantz NR1609 → £650 ★★★★★

AirPlay 2 and a phono stage input for vinyl junkies are among the new specs of Marantz's 7-channel slimline model. An assured performer with film and music; great usability and styling. HCC #295

07



NAD Masters Series M17 V2 → £5,500 ★★★★★

Dirac Live replaces Audyssey EQ in this revamped high-end processor; 4K HDR passthrough, Atmos and DTS:X decoding, and BluOS music streaming also join the party. HCC #293

08



Sony STR-DN1080 → £550 ★★★★★

Sony is back in the AVR game with a first Atmos model that adds worthy phantom rear speaker processing to its 5.1.2 sonics. A few UI niggles don't take much of the shine off an impressive budget buy. HCC #277

09



Pioneer VSX-933 → £470 ★★★★★

An affordable seven-channel AVR where copious music streaming options are joined by a punchy, upbeat home cinema performance. Improved remote and menus, but only one HDMI output. HCC #292

10



IOTAVX AVXP1 → £1,050 ★★★★★

Brit brand power amplifier with plenty of Class AB grunt (rated at 7 x 110W into 8 ohms) and a rugged build quality – one to audition if your cinema setup is in need of more channels. HCC #293

TOP 5 Bonus features



Behind the Fallout

This seven-part documentary looking at the making of *Mission Impossible: Fallout*'s astonishing stunts (including one cut from the final film) is a great accompaniment to Tom Cruise's latest blockbuster. HCC #293

★★★★★



Maelstrom: The Odyssey of Waterworld

Get superb insight into the fraught production of Kevin Costner's post-apocalyptic epic with this new feature-length *Making of...* documentary on Arrow's BD release. HCC #295

★★★★★



Ghost Stories: Directors' commentary

Directing/writing duo Andy Nyman and Jeremy Dyson provide a superb chat track for their spooky anthology flick, highlighting the movie's countless Easter Eggs. HCC #289

★★★★★



Deadpool 2 commentary

Star Ryan Reynolds, director David Leitch and writers Rhett Reese and Paul Wernick team up for this detail-packed but also light-hearted chat track for the recent superhero sequel Blu-ray release. HCC #291

★★★★★



All Eyes on Lenzi: The Life and Times of the Exploitation Titan

Wonderful 84-minute documentary focusing on Italian director Umberto Lenzi, included on 88 Films' new BD release of 1975 flick *EyeBall*. HCC #291

★★★★★

TOP 10 Subwoofers

01


SVS SB-2000 → £800 ★★★★★

This follow up to the SB-1000 offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbues Blu-rays with quick, taut and potent LFE, it's a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. *HCC #233*

02


REL No.25 → £6,500 ★★★★★

REL celebrates its 25th anniversary in style with this 15in/1,000W premium concoction that exhibits exhilarating speed and nuance down to serious depths. Big, but beautiful. *HCC #271*

03


Bowers & Wilkins DB1D

→ £3,750 ★★★★★

This sequel to the DB1 moves EQ to an app and changes driver/amp design. Beautifully controlled performance with depth and detail. Gorgeous bodywork. *HCC #277*

04


JL Audio Fathom f212v2

→ £6,500 ★★★★★

A second outing for JL's 2 x 12in monster, with an increase in power (3,600W) and room EQ improvements among the changes. Sounds as good as you'd imagine. *HCC #261*

05


SVS SB16-Ultra

→ £2,500 ★★★★★

A 16in driver and 1,500W amp combine to give SVS's flagship sealed sub real appeal. Goes low but remains tight and fast. App-assisted EQ and operation. *HCC #270*

06


REL HT/1205

→ £700 ★★★★★

A larger (12in) driver and punchier amp than on the HT/1003 increases LFE enjoyment – but still at a bargain price. Lacks a bit of subtlety though. *HCC #290*

07


REL HT/1003

→ £500 ★★★★★

REL targets film fans with a 10in sub that drops its usual simultaneous high/low-level input to hit a new price point. Power and speed are its strengths. *HCC #286*

08


SVS SB-4000

→ £1,800 ★★★★★

Similar in operation and styling to the SB16-Ultra flagship, but smaller and more affordable. Superior DSP results in a real sense of control. *HCC #284*

09


GoldenEar SuperSub X

→ £1,450 ★★★★★

Four drivers squeezed into a relatively compact design and given plenty of push from a 1,400W amp. Standout traits are impact and depth. *HCC #272*

10


KEF Kube10b

→ £600 ★★★★★

The middle option of KEF's new Kube range packs a 10in driver, 300W Class D amp and 56-bit DSP engine to maintain efficient low-frequency control. *HCC #283*

TOP 5 Console games


Red Dead Redemption II

Rockstar Games' years-in-the-making Wild West action/puzzler prequel offers a mammoth open-world gaming experience with excellent attention to detail. Fantastic five-star fun, despite muted visuals. *HCC #293*

★★★★★


F1 2018

HDR grading adds visual allure to Codemasters' latest racing sim, while various tweaks to the career mode loosen the straitjacket approach of previous years and make it easier for novices. Hooray! *HCC #290*

★★★★★


Marvel's Spider-Man

Swing around New York City in this joyous, bright and colourful superhero tie-in. Graphically rich, with intuitive gameplay and fast, free-flowing combat. A suitably epic score completes an excellent all-round package. *HCC #291*

★★★★★


Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

Boasting a host of characters (including some retro surprises), eight-player multiplayer, smooth 60fps visuals and frantic action, this Nintendo Switch beat-'em up is a hoot. *HCC #295*

★★★★★


Shadow of the Tomb Raider

Lara's back and she means business in this lengthy, stealth-tastic puzzle adventure from Square Enix. The best *Tomb Raider* title yet, and gorgeous to look at. *HCC #292*

★★★★★

TOP 10 Accessories

01



NEW ENTRY

Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K → £50 ★★★★★

This upgraded streaming dongle brings 4K HDR (HDR10+; Dolby Vision) and Dolby Atmos to your movie den. Voice control improves search, while a new quad-core processor yields quick load times and stream optimisation. A little stunner. *HCC #295*



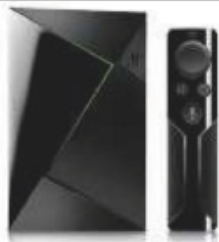
02



Yamaha WX-AD10 → £150 ★★★★★

Simple to use, unobtrusive add-on that brings MusicCast multiroom/hi-res streaming to legacy AV gear via 3.5mm/phono. Not a bad price – only available in grey, unfortunately. *HCC #274*

03



Nvidia Shield Android TV

→ £180 ★★★★★

The Android-based streamer/gaming box gets a gentle revamp – same silicon, neater design, new features including future support for Google Assistant. Slick and easy to use.

HCC #272

04



Roku Streaming Stick+

→ £70 ★★★★★

If a simple life is your aim, this content-rich, 4K/HDR-capable stick from the streaming specialist is your friend. Idiot-proof interface and control. Good price.

HCC #282

05



Panasonic SC-GA10

→ £230 ★★★★★

Panasonic partners with Google Assistant for its debut smart speaker, and doesn't forget to focus on sonic power as well as AI fun. Pricier than many rivals, but still appealing.

HCC #284

06



Edifier S350DB

→ £250 ★★★★★

Active 2.1 speaker system that's a fine alternative to a soundbar, with good bass integration and effects separation. No HDMI hookup and retro styling, but easy to setup and use.

HCC #291

07



Apple TV 4K

→ £180 (32GB) ★★★★★

With Apple's iTunes movie store offering 4K HDR (Dolby Vision) movies at the same price as Full HD downloads, this compact media player (irritating handset aside) is sure to tempt.

HCC #284

08



Synology DS119j

→ £95 ★★★★★

Entry-level single-bay NAS (you'll need to add your own HDD) that benefits from Synology's impressive DSM operating system. Quick to get up and running, versatile and smart-looking.

HCC #292

09



Systemline S7 Netlink Music Player

→ £700 ★★★★★

Stereo streamer with integrated services including BBC Radio at better-than-usual quality. Installation flexibility makes up for the prosaic design.

HCC #290

10



Amazon Echo Sub

→ £120 ★★★★★

This nicely styled bass bin to supplement Amazon's Echo speakers adds notable punch to streamed music and makes a 2.1 Dot system good value. Lacks subtlety and is overbearing with speech radio, though.

HCC #293

TOP 5 Blu-ray/DVD boxsets



William Castle at Columbia: Volume One

Four gimmick-filled spine-tinglers (including 1960's part-anaglyph 3D *13 Ghosts*) are joined by a typically brilliant selection of extras in Indicator's deluxe package.

HCC #294

★★★★★



The Expanse: Season Two

This second helping of superior TV sci-fi benefits from more bonus material than before, while the 1080p visuals and DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundmixes for the 13 episodes are uniformly excellent.

HCC #293

★★★★★



Dr Who: The Collection – Season 19

The BBC's BD outing for Peter Davison's debut Time Lord season benefits from the show's move (in parts) from video to 16mm film capture. A TARDIS full of extras, too.

HCC #295

★★★★★



Batman: The Complete Animated Series

All 109 episodes of Fox's groundbreaking 'toon have been meticulously restored for this BD boxset. Among the copious extras is a new 98-minute *Making of...* doc.

HCC #293

★★★★★



Once Upon a Time in China Trilogy

Jet Li stars (as folk hero Wong Fei-Hung) in this trio of 1990s martial arts flicks, bundled here with fourth movie *...in America and China*. Extras include a trio of commentary tracks.

HCC #295

★★★★★

TOP 10 Soundbars & Soundbases



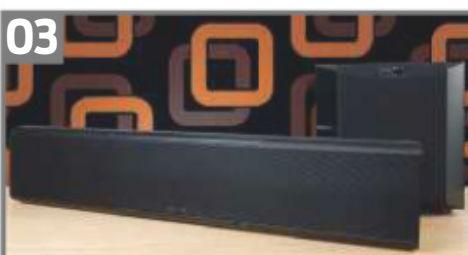
01 Samsung HW-N950 → £1,500 ★★★★★

The latest and greatest soundbar system to arrive from Samsung's US-based Audio Lab, the HDMI-equipped N950 crafts a dynamic, detailed and immersive 7.1.4 Atmos/DTS:X soundfield without cluttering your room. *HCC #290*



02 Canton DM55 → £320 ★★★★★

Canton's smallest soundbase still delivers big sonic thrills. Twin woofers underpin clean and crisp mids and highs, and build quality is first-rate. Doddle to use. Bluetooth built-in. *HCC #260*



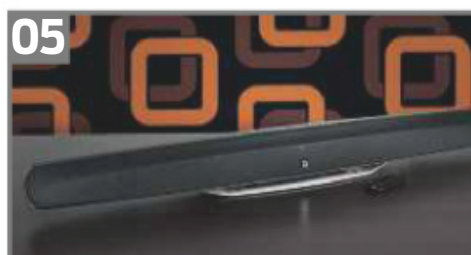
03 Yamaha YSP-5600SW → £1,900 ★★★★★

With its 46 drivers (including upfiring) this premium 'bar delivers precisely steered and immersive audio, even of the Atmos variety. Potent wireless sub and 4K-capable HDMI switching sweeten the high-end deal. *HCC #254*



04 Denon HEOS Bar → £570 ★★★★★

Multiroom-ready and app-controllable, this premium single-enclosure model offers powerful, detailed and warm sonics in spades. Can be expanded into a 5.1 system with extra HEOS hardware. *HCC #287*



05 Q Acoustics M3 → £300 ★★★★★

A 4in x 6in woofer is tucked away in the M3's eye-catching angular chassis, ensuring this well-priced soundbar has a full-range performance. Simple to use. Bluetooth streaming. *HCC #271*



06 LG SK10Y → £1,200 ★★★★★

High-price but high-performance, LG's Atmos-enabled soundbar system is large in scale, rich in bass and offers 4K HDMI switching. Over 1.4m wide, so won't suit all setups. *HCC #288*



07 Sony HT-ZF9 → £650 ★★★★★

This 3.1-channel soundbar handles Dolby Atmos streams and promises enveloping sonics via DSP trickery. The result isn't noticeable overhead audio, but a wide, high and exciting performance. *HCC #289*



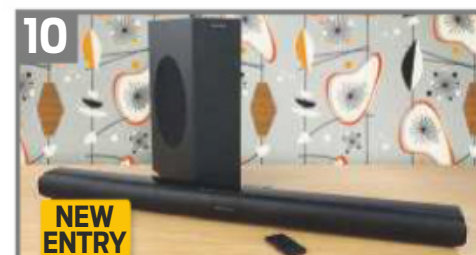
08 JBL Bar Studio → £150 ★★★★★

No subwoofer here, just a fairly compact stereo 'bar that offers a useful soundstage-widening 'Surround' mode, HDMI ARC connectivity, and a decent performance for the price. *HCC #284*



09 Q Acoustics M2 → £300 ★★★★★

Easily accommodated in/on AV furniture, and packing HDMI ARC for a simple hookup, this BMR-driver/built-in woofer soundbase impresses with its energetic delivery and price. *HCC #279*



10 Wharfedale Vista 200S → £150 ★★★★★

HDMI ARC makes this budget soundbar/sub easy to install, and its audio presentation delivers good stereo imaging and rich bass. Better with movies than music, and not the grandest of soundstages. *HCC #295*

TOP 5 Back-catalogue Blu-rays



Waterworld: Limited Edition

Kevin Costner's waterlogged post-apocalyptic epic never quite lives up to its promise, but Arrow's BD release pleases fans by packing three different cuts of the movie. *HCC #295*

★★★★★



Laura

1944 film noir gem starring Gene Tierney and Dana Andrews, dug up by Eureka for Masters of Cinema BD treatment. Black-and-white photography looks exquisite, and extras include an alternate cut. *HCC #295*

★★★★★



Hackers

This 1995 internet thriller starring Angelina Jolie has a devoted cult following that will appreciate 88 Films' new Blu-ray – a lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is joined by a retrospective doc and chat track from Mark Kermode. *HCC #294*

★★★★★



The Lion King [UHD Blu-ray]

4K HDR presentation and Dolby Atmos remix means this is comfortably the best Disney's classic 'toon has looked or sounded on home media. A few missing extras, though. *HCC #294*

★★★★★

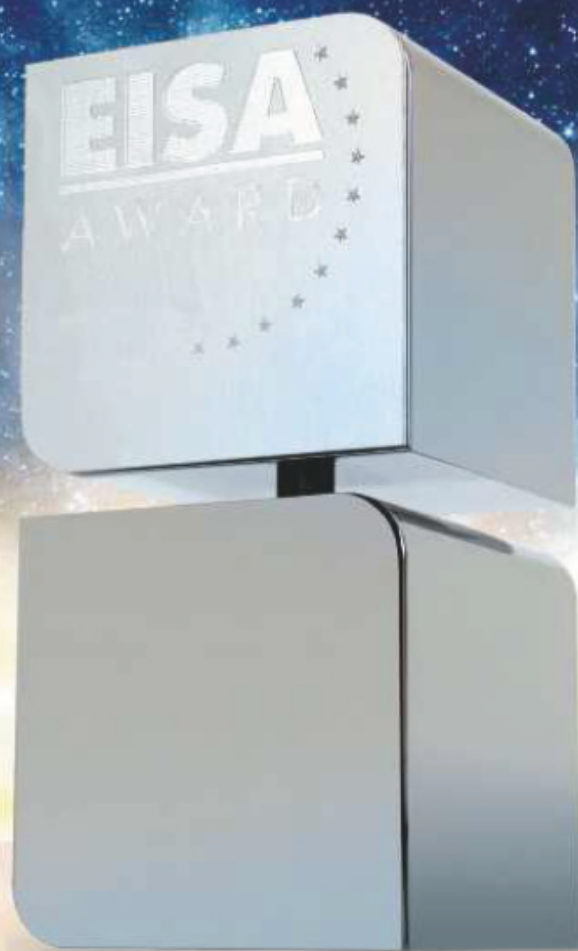


Braveheart [UHD Blu-ray]

Fox delivers an utterly gorgeous image here, courtesy of a 4K scan of original negatives, and boosts the beauty of James Horner's score via an Atmos makeover. A worthwhile revisit of Mel Gibson's historical epic. *HCC #294*

★★★★★

CELEBRATING THE YEAR'S BEST PRODUCTS



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TOP 5 PVRs



Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and smart TiVo functionality. If you're in a cable area, consider it

★★★★★



Sky Q, £subscription

Sky's new top-tier product offering dazzles with its image-rich user interface, wireless multiroom skills and recording flexibility delivered by the PVR's 12 tuners. Now supports 4K content

★★★★★



Humax FVP-5000T

Revamped menus, faster operation and tweaks to its triple-tuner engine make this the most advanced Freeview Play PVR around – and it doubles admirably as a DLNA player/media jukebox. 500GB/1TB/2TB

★★★★★



Humax DTR-T4000, £subscription

This YouView-based PVR is required to get BT Sport's new Ultra HD channel – available to those with BT fast fibre and a BT TV sub. Easy to use and with 1TB of storage

★★★★★



Manhattan T2-R, £120

The 500GB HDD and twin-tuner spec of this Freeview HD PVR is basic, but Manhattan's new hardware design, user interface (and the price tag) are appealing. Easy to use.

★★★★★

TOP 5 Headphones



JBL Tune600BTNC, £85

A commendable budget option from JBL, with closed-back, comfortable ear-cups, reasonably effective noise-cancelling, Bluetooth hookup, and a presentation with a good sense of scale and impact

★★★★★



Nuraphones, £350

Unusual over-ear/in-ear hybrid cans that measure the acoustic response of your inner ear to fine-tune performance. It's a highly impressive trick, but the design can make these a bit uncomfortable to wear

★★★★★



1More MK802, £150

Ignore the bling-tastic blue or red finishes and focus on the assured sound performance from these well-priced closed-back cans. Features include wireless Bluetooth and app control (with burn-in mode). Great value

★★★★★



Bowers & Wilkins PX, £330

B&W adds noise-cancelling to the general spec of its previous P7 wireless cans, a welcome update for those seeking uninterrupted listening. Offers a neutral, balanced sound suited to both movies and music

★★★★★

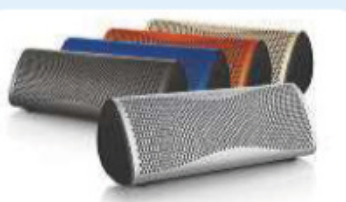


Audio Technica ATH-SR9, £400

45mm drivers and Audio Technica's Midpoint Mount tech deliver wide, deep, spacious sonics. Memory foam padding aids listener comfort; 3m cable should suit most AV setups

★★★★★

TOP 5 Wireless speakers



KEF Muo, £300

Portable Bluetooth speaker that's a cut above much of the competition. KEF's sonic knowhow results in a punchy, dynamic presentation that cherishes lossless rips. Excellent build quality

★★★★★



Yamaha MusicCast 50, £450

New to Yamaha's multiroom stable is this stereo desktop speaker with a clean, balanced delivery, neat aesthetic and control via the brand's rock-solid and well-stocked app.

★★★★★



Dynaudio Music 7, £875

Top-of-the-range multiroom option from Dynaudio, this sizable speaker creates a full-range, detailed soundstage. Music App offers useful adjustments and EQ modes. Inputs include HDMI (ARC)

★★★★★



Airpulse Audio A200, £800

Monitor-style active speakers offering physical and wireless hookups, a premium build and a sweet yet weighty sound delivered by ribbon tweeters and 5.5in midbass drivers

★★★★★



Denon HEOS 5 HS2, £350

The mid-range multiroom speaker gets a second-gen revamp, adding welcome hi-res audio playback and Bluetooth connectivity. Gorgeous looks, boisterous, room-filling sound

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA Choice

→ IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Panasonic in 2019 TV marque reveals its plans
Beautiful bass Subwoofer tips and LFE demo discs revealed
Shipshape and Bristol fashion What was hot at the UK audio show?

→ REVIEWS

Fyne Audio 5.1 speaker system Sony VPL-VW870ES laser projector
GoldenEar Triton Atmos array Affordable subwoofer group test
PLUS News, software, opinion, comps and more

CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER

ISSUE
#297 ON SALE
Mar 21



AV Avenger

Sometimes it seems we're too busy counting pixels to watch the images they make, says **Steve May**, which is why he's glad Sony is changing tack

IF YOU'RE READING this, it's a fair bet that you share my delightfully unhealthy obsession with new home cinema gadgetry. But the very tech we love can seem to get in the way of our hobby. It's too easy to wander down a hardware rabbit hole and forget the reason we buy this stuff in the first place.

The recent scramble to bag first IMAX Enhanced Blu-ray discs is a case in point. No one in their right mind should actually want to own these things – they're IMAX documentaries from the vault, for crying out loud. Are they really going to showcase wideband theatrical audio and the modern movie experience? Of course not. Come back when you have some real movies to watch.

I think something similar must have dawned on Sony. The Japanese major ripped up the press conference rulebook recently, when it staged its 2019 CES media event and left all references to new gizmos on the cutting room floor.

Normally these events are a dry run-through of new kit. Imagine a product catalogue being read aloud by real people, but with irrational hyperbole and (usually) malfunctioning demonstrations.

Yet Sony did something different and not a little daring. It made no hardware announcements at all. Instead it brought showbiz to the Las Vegas convention centre, using this global platform to stress its creative ties to movies, music and gaming.

Journos, laptops poised for breaking news, were flummoxed. What happened to all the specs? I thought it was a genius move.

Synergy of sound and vision

Rather than shill gear, CEO Kenichiro Yoshida introduced creative executives from Sony Pictures and Sony Music. He wasn't there to tout tech, but to remind everyone why we love it in the first place.

The message was clear: Sony is a company with uniquely interwoven technology and entertainment divisions. And he pulled out the big guns to prove it.

James Cameron was on VT waxing lyrical about how Sony engineers had been prepared to reinvent the wheel

in order to develop the Venice camera used for his *Avatar* sequels; the Venice separates image sensor and optics from the main recorder, allowing greater freedom and filming flexibility.

Then, just hours after their Golden Globe win, producers Chris Miller and Phil Lord swung onto stage to explain creative processes behind *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. They unravelled the many animation techniques used, and made the point that sometimes to create something unique you have to be prepared to think differently. They also said that anyone could wear the Spider-Man mask, and that with great power etc etc. But I knew that already. Sony wasn't putting on a press conference here, it was celebrating entertainment.

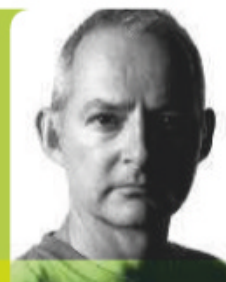
Then to ram home the point, Aibo-loving Pharrell Williams danced on and recounted a recent trip to Sony HQ Japan, where he experienced the company's new multichannel music format 360 Reality Audio (see p20) for the first time.

Williams tried to follow an autocue, but soon told Sony to pull the plug so that he could simply riff with the audience. In a world of risk averse corporations, this engaging approach was reinvigorating.

Perhaps it's finally time to end specification envy, and double down on the things that really matter in life. Like debating whether the zombies in *Kingdom* are more terrifying than the whisperers in *The Walking Dead*... ■

Are you waiting for HDMI 2.1 before buying new hardware? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Steve May doesn't want to watch any documentary on his home cinema system, unless it is one about zombies





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